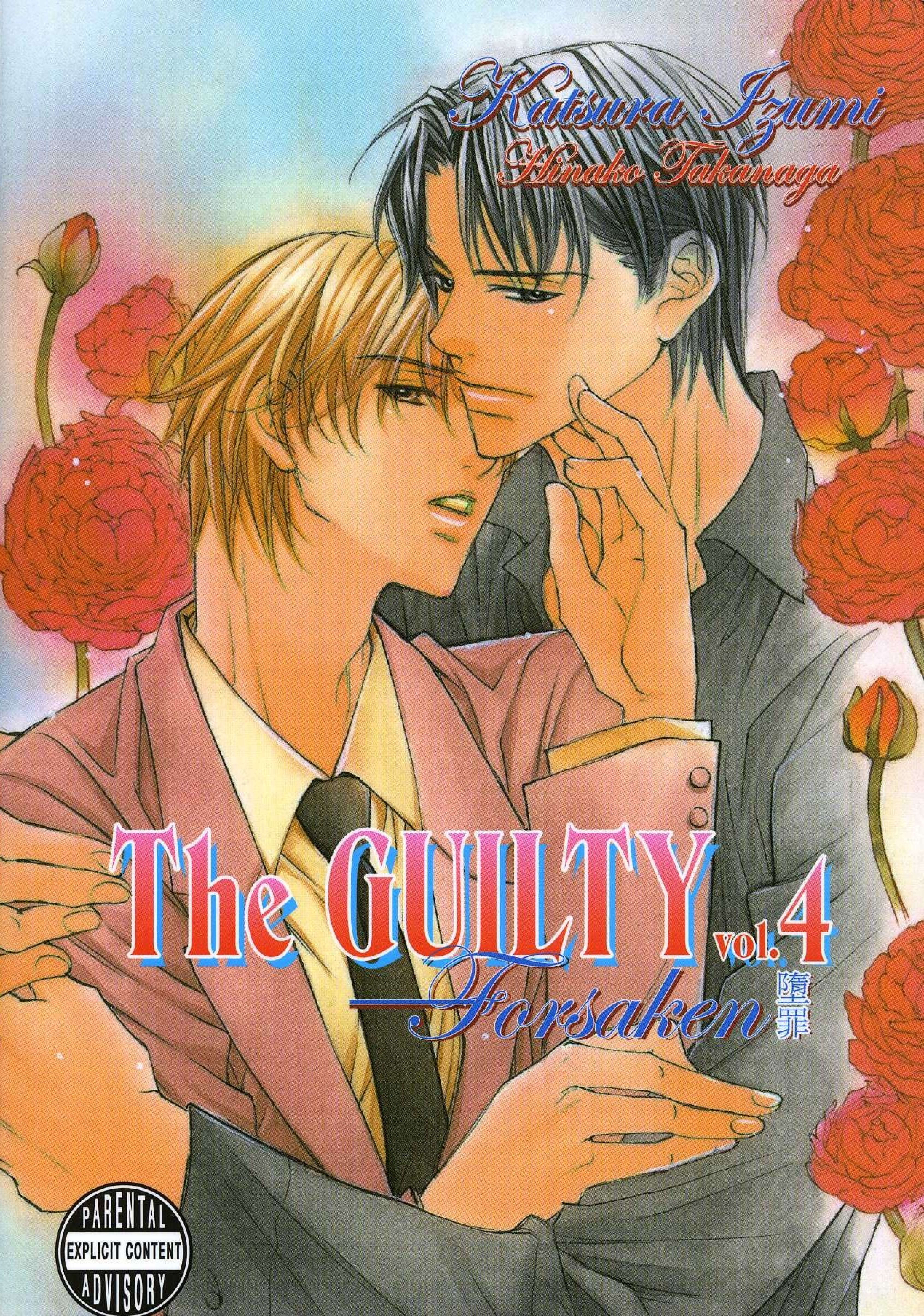

Katsura Izumi

Hinako Takanaga

# The GUILTY vol. 4

## Forsaken 堕罪

PARENTAL
EXPLICIT CONTENT
ADVISORY

Juné™
Yaoi Novel

*"And what were you thinking of putting in the fan book?"*

*When the conversation turned to Toya at the editorial meeting, he looked up. That summer, Hodaka's new novel, **Chrysalis**, would go on sale to complete the trilogy that began with **Emergence**.*

*When Toya told his boss Makihara about Hodaka's plan to make **Emergence** into a trilogy, Makihara had become suddenly motivated and suggested that they make a fan book for the completion of the trilogy.*

**Toya Sakurai is starting fresh in a new apartment, now enticingly closer to his lover, Kai Hodaka. When he invites his lover to come visit, he realizes the benefits of living so much closer. But when Toya's publishing company decides to put out a fan book on Kai Hodaka, Toya is shocked to learn just how little he knows about his lover after two years!**

**Also included: a collection of short stories with deeper insight on our favorite guilty pair! Toya spends a love-burning weekend with Hodaka in Hayama after the torturously written *Emergence*. Then, six months into their riotous relationship, Hodaka shows just what he's willing to do to make Toya happy. The loving, dangerous, guilty love they share comes to a climax in this final volume.**

**NOVEL / DRAMA / ROMANCE** **US $8.95**

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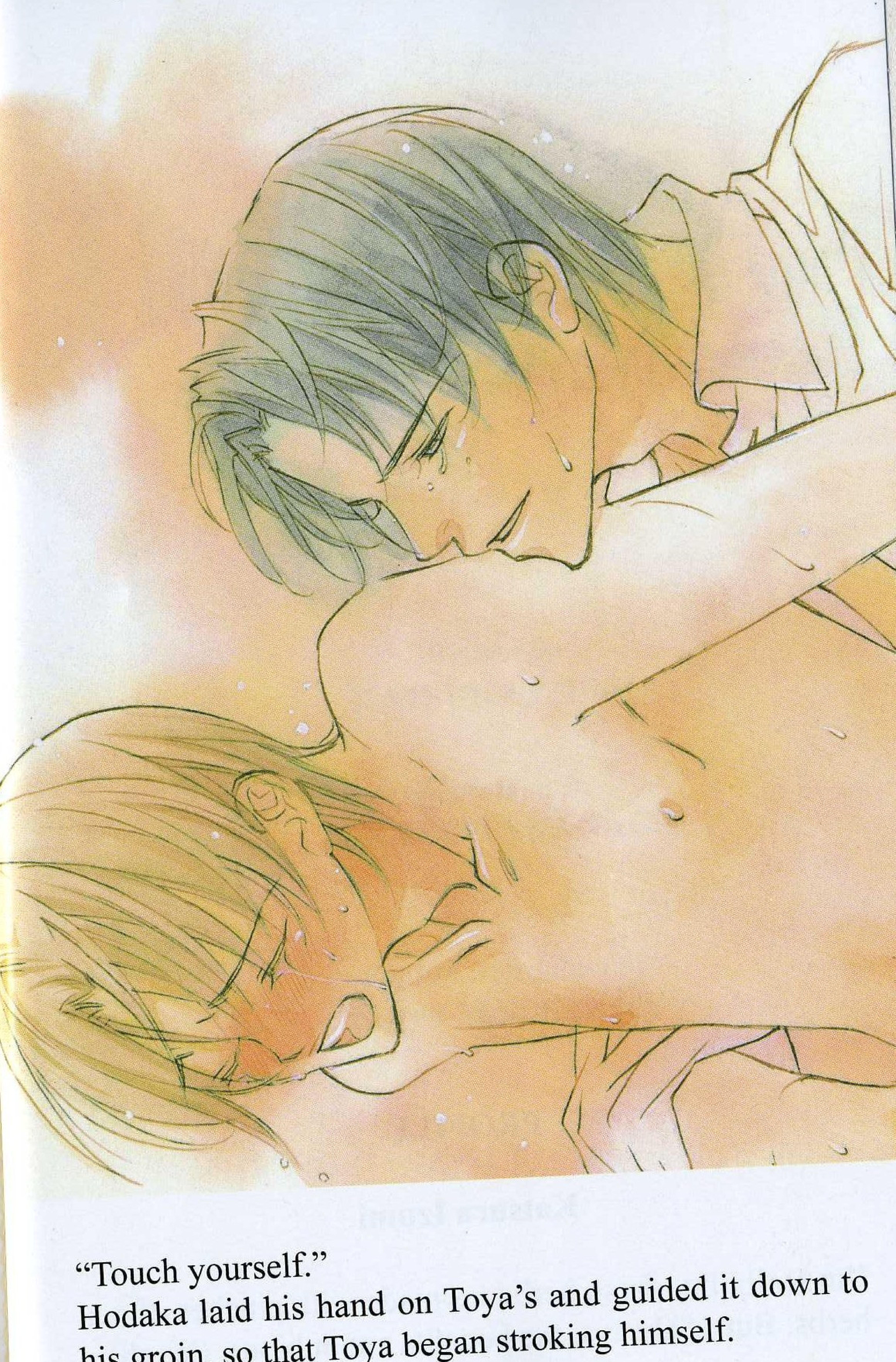

"Touch yourself."
Hodaka laid his hand on Toya's and guided it down to his groin, so that Toya began stroking himself.

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# *~Precious Love~*

## *Chapter One*

Halfway through the night, the sound of crashing waves woke Toya Sakurai from a pleasant sleep. He was in a soft bed he didn't recognize, surrounded by the feeling of smooth sheets on his skin. The bed was much too comfortable to be the one in his tiny apartment. So where was he?

Toya noticed a dull ache in his body, and retraced his hazy memory until he remembered that he was at Kai Hodaka's summer house in Hayama. Hodaka was a famous mystery writer and Toya was his editor. Toya had originally come to pick up a new manuscript, called *Emergence*, but had ended up staying the night.

Toya groped around the bed with his right hand, but the warm body he expected to find beside him was gone.

"Mister Hodaka?" Toya called out hesitantly, but only the sound of waves crashing and retreating beat against his ears. There was no answer. The wind rustled through the trees, making them tap against the window.

When Toya lowered his bare feet to the old wooden floor, it creaked loudly. He flinched at the touch of cold wood, and that, combined with the cold night air on his naked skin, forced him to grab a bathrobe hanging over a chair. Otherwise, the freezing winter air would chill him to the bone.

"Sir?"

There was still no answer.

Kai Hodaka was Toya's favorite author and had been for many years. Hodaka was the main reason Toya had started working in publishing. But Hodaka was capricious and arrogant, and for their first assignment together, he had demanded the use of Toya's body in exchange for a new manuscript. That had been the start of a twisted physical relationship between them.

At first Toya had been able to convince himself to go along with it as part of his job, and as a way to get a new novel from his favorite author. But he had gradually lost heart in the relationship. Once he'd reached his limits, Toya had resigned as Hodaka's editor.

But for some reason, Hodaka had told Makihara, Toya's replacement, that he wouldn't submit his manuscript to anyone but Toya. So Toya had gone to Hodaka's summer home to retrieve it. He had intended it to be his last contact with Hodaka, but instead he had found the end of his one-sided love when Hodaka confessed to him. Toya had spent so much time in pain that he wanted to be with Hodaka no matter what, to feel the warmth of the man's body.

Restless, Toya left the room and walked barefoot down the hall. He didn't want to insult the owner, but there was something eerie about the old mansion, and Toya didn't want to be left alone.

He walked past a countless number of doors before spotting a faint light spilling out from under one of them. The building was so old that its parts no longer fit together snugly. The door was shut, but Toya's unease at being left by himself beat out his reluctance and he turned the knob without even knocking.

"Sir?"

Hodaka was there.

The library's desk faced away from the door, but Hodaka was turned in his chair so that Toya could see him in profile. Solitude wafted off of the man palpably as he gazed vacantly out the window. There was nothing to see outside but an expansive emptiness.

"Sir?"

Toya called to him once again and Hodaka turned slowly to look at him.

"Oh, Toya. Is something wrong?"

The man's beautiful voice touched Toya's ears. It was deep and sensual, and had a mysterious power that took its listeners prisoner.

"I woke up and…you weren't there."

"Come here."

The man's voice practically dripped from the air as he bid Toya closer and Toya obeyed.

Kai Hodaka: the most popular mystery author of his generation. He had dominated Toya's body shamelessly and then taken hold of his spirit as well.

It was easy to do, since Hodaka was gorgeous, with his sloping eyes, jet-black hair, and long nose. His features were completely unlike Toya's face, which was almost feminine in its gentleness. Hodaka looked like the thirty-five year-old man he was, while Toya was left feeling foolish for comparing himself to such a man.

"Why are you barefoot? You'll catch a cold."

When Hodaka showed Toya the merest glimpse of kindness, it made Toya's heart ache with joy.

Was it just a dream?

That thought sparked in Toya an impulse to make sure that it was reality.

"Will you warm me up?"

Hodaka smirked and touched Toya's cheek, gazing down at him. "Earlier wasn't enough for you?"

"Nowhere near enough," Toya whispered cloyingly, wrapping his arms around Hodaka's neck.

Toya had waited a long time before saying "I love you." When he had finally reached the limits of his endurance, he'd tried to distance himself from Hodaka by resigning as his editor. He had even faced the possibility that they would never see each other again.

But things were finally different.

If he was going to be with Hodaka, he wanted to be sure. He had become so greedy, enflamed by his limitless passion.

"Sir—"

Toya pressed his lips to Hodaka's, begging for a kiss, and got what he wanted. The kiss deepened immediately as Hodaka explored the sensitive flesh inside Toya's mouth, making Toya moan.

"Nngh—"

When Hodaka pulled his lips away with obvious reluctance, a line of saliva shimmered from his mouth, as if he were trying to stay connected through the emptiness.

"Warmer?"

Toya stared at Hodaka with glistening, uncomprehending eyes. The man chuckled and kissed

Toya's forehead.

"Your good-night kiss."

"What?"

"If you stay out like this, you'll catch a cold. Get back to bed."

Toya didn't want to be pushed away. Even after they had shared their feelings for each another, he was still insecure. If he relaxed, he felt like he would be sucked into an abyss.

Toya had no confidence that he would be able to keep hold of Hodaka. So he didn't care if he used his looks, or his body, or anything else. If Hodaka was attracted to something, Toya would use that to keep hold of him. Their love was like a thick swamp, impossible to climb out of, and Toya wanted to pull Hodaka down into it, too.

"I'm going back to Tokyo tomorrow. So tonight—"

Toya wanted to lie in Hodaka's arms. The thought made heat swell through his body, stretching him painfully tight. Each time Toya tasted that sweet intoxication, he knew that it would break him. The tempests that Hodaka invoked in him would break him and scatter the fragments to the wind.

"Then shouldn't you get some sleep?"

"No—I want to be with you," Toya said, kissing Hodaka's neck.

Each time he asked Hodaka to be with him, it was like something inside Toya crumbled. But even though this sensation threatened to overwhelm him, he couldn't leave.

"I want you to keep me warm. So I don't catch a cold," Toya said. His responsibilities had ended when he picked up the manuscript. So he forgot about work and planned on indulging himself in his feelings for Hodaka.

But he yearned for the heart of the man who loved him—the most important thing of all—and risked his own heart to pursue that. Though Toya had gotten Hodaka, he was still driven by a need to assure himself of his success, and so he was left offering the only thing he could: sex.

"Try to convince me using your dirtiest tricks," Hodaka said, making Toya's cheeks flush with shame. "If you tell me exactly what you want, I'll do it to you."

Hodaka always did that, passing the choice on to Toya. But it was just a show: Toya really had no choice at all. It was nothing more than a line in the game to make things more fun.

"Toya—"

Hodaka's voice was deep as he pressed Toya for an answer, sending a shudder through Toya's senses to the point where he couldn't think straight. He sat on Hodaka's knees, as if to envelope him.

"Do it. Please," Toya said.

"Do what?"

"I want you…to do everything, sir."

Hodaka pulled up the hem of Toya's robe so he could trail his fingers over Toya's thigh. Toya wasn't wearing any underwear, so Hodaka's caress traced directly over his lower body until, finally, he wrapped his fingers around Toya's penis.

"Nngh!"

"When you act like this, it makes me never want to let you go."

Hodaka's words were like sweet nothings: Toya couldn't be sure how true they were.

"Which do you like better, when I touch here, or in the back?"

Hodaka's laughing voice tickled in Toya's ears. He couldn't speak—it was like he was under a curse. He had become a creature only capable of feeling pleasure.

"Ah! Ah—nngh!"

They were still only at the level of light caresses, but Toya's body was already filled with heat. He felt ashamed of how his body responded, but he was so accustomed to Hodaka's touch that his body acted quickly and easily.

"Which do you want?" Hodaka asked.

"I want…both…"

It was too much for Toya even when a dry finger began to explore between his cheeks, twitching with passion already. Ecstasy radiated out from that point, making thought and rationality and everything else disappear.

"You're squeezing me so hard. You want it bad, huh?"

It was unbearable to be taunted like that.

"Nngh—ah!"

"Is this hard for you? Just a second."

Hodaka needed something to make the penetration easier. He tried nudging Toya off his lap, but Toya shook his head.

"No—it's fine. I'm all right—"

"Toya."

Hodaka's voice was reassuring, but Toya was not going to move. He didn't want to waste one minute or even one second. He wanted to be connected to Hodaka as long as possible.

"Put it in!"

Toya knew he was saying dirty, shameful things, but he pleaded for it anyway. There had been almost no foreplay, but his body was already so hotly excited. He pressed himself against Hodaka, begging for more.

"There's no reasoning with you," Hodaka said.

"Y-you..." Toya growled. Hodaka was impossible. He had told Toya to convince him, and so Toya had. His body was already loose, and so wet it felt like he would shatter at the first touch.

"This is my fault? Don't try and shift the blame," Hodaka said.

"I'm still wet…from before. It's okay."

Toya didn't know if that was true or not. But if he didn't say that, he would only get more impatient with Hodaka's games.

"If you're desperate enough to say that, let's find out."

Suddenly, Hodaka lifted Toya up and laid him down on the desk. He bent Toya's body in half and spread his legs wide, exposing him to his gaze.

"Don't look at me!"

Toya's cheeks burned with embarrassment. The part of his body that had been exposed was voracious, twitching and eager to swallow Hodaka up. It was a part of Toya's own body, but he couldn't control it.

"You want me, don't you? Then show me the proof." Hodaka took his hands off of Toya's legs and murmured, "Tell me how much you want me. Pull it open for me."

Toya must have been under a spell for there was a mysterious power in that profound, incredible voice. Toya didn't want to do something so lewd, but he couldn't disobey Hodaka's voice.

With his knees at his chest, Toya reached down with both hands to spread open the shallow flesh of his buttocks, but his eyes filled with tears as he tried to perform the perverse act.

"Does it hurt?" Hodaka asked.

Toya nodded obediently. He had no way to express why it was painful. He was just like an animal.

"But you want me to do you anyway?"

"Mm—" Unable to speak, Toya bit down firmly on his lip.

"These are the only times that you're good and obedient," Hodaka chuckled slightly. "It's cute."

Toya felt something hot push against him and he gasped reflexively. In the same moment, he felt his lover push into him.

"Ah!"

"Relax."

"Nn—nngh."

Toya couldn't speak. He had gotten used to it before, but when Hodaka buried himself in Toya's body, it still caused some pain.

"Do you want me to stop?" Hodaka asked.

Toya wriggled, and the rough sensation of the man rubbing over the sensitive walls inside his body transformed into pleasure. It excited Toya so much that he felt it would drive him crazy.

"I-I'm fine!"

The desk pressed hard against Toya's back, and the robe rubbed painfully over his skin. But when he imagined Hodaka reaching far into his body, he couldn't restrain his impatience for more.

"Ungh!"

It still wasn't enough. Toya wanted Hodaka even deeper. He wanted Hodaka to conquer him to the deepest point, to go further than even he believed possible.

"Toya."

The man's gentle, almost hoarse whisper reached Toya's ears and Hodaka pressed his body forward, searching Toya out.

"Ah!"

Hodaka moved even further inside, grinding into Toya's flesh and making Toya gasp. Toya had thought he was prepared, but when the sensation finally hit, his body trembled with the fear of pain.

"If it hurts, you need to relax," Hodaka said.

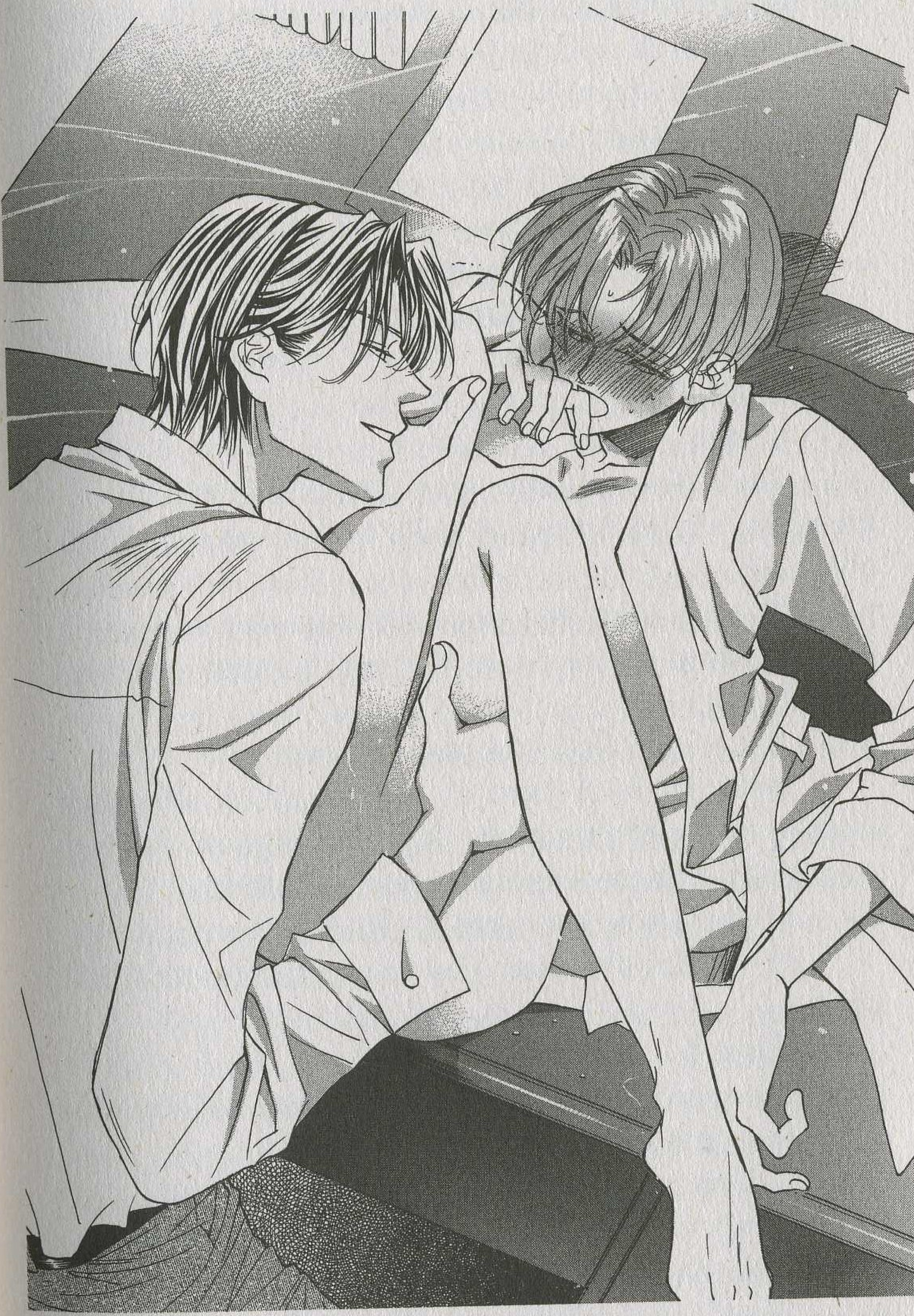
"No, I—I can't! Ah! Nngh!"

"You don't want to get hurt, do you?"

"No…no! Don't stop!"

It hurt and Toya was afraid, but he didn't want to let Hodaka go. He stopped Hodaka as he was beginning to pull out and wrapped his legs around the man's waist so he couldn't escape.

Hodaka caressed Toya's thighs with his palm, cradling the flesh. He forced more fluid from Toya as he



touched his penis, making it tremble beautifully. Toya's penis, wet with anticipation, rubbed against his belly, threatening to burst at any moment. That light touch made his body convulse and Hodaka tightened his grip.

"Wait—not yet!" Toya cried.

"I'm barely touching you and you're dripping everywhere. You like being violated that much?"

"I love it," Toya answered rapturously.

Hodaka chuckled and whispered back. "Degenerate."

"Nngh—ahh!"

Toya climaxed after only the lightest pressure on his penis. His fluids wet Hodaka's shirt and dirtied his own belly.

"It's so thin. But you still want me anyway?" Hodaka asked as he drove forward, penetrating even deeper.

"Ah—agh! Nngh! Mister…Hodaka…"

With his body bent in two, painfully allowing Hodaka to invade his body, Toya felt himself shaking shamefully with the combination of lust and joy.

"Tell me how you want it," Hodaka demanded.

"F—" Toya's voice was hoarse and he couldn't say it.

"Toya."

The man's sweet, encouraging voice led Toya to open his mouth and try again.

"Fill me up…"

Toya's voice wavered as lust mixed seamlessly with his words. Hodaka only smiled adoringly at him.

"How?" he asked, pressing a kiss to Toya's temple. Toya felt his body being lifted up higher, the angle made sharper.

"Inside…go deeper. With your—"

Where Hodaka was already inside and Toya twitched to keep him there. He wanted to know that he belonged to Hodaka. He wanted to feel him inside.

"You want me to be mean?" Hodaka asked

Toya nodded again and again, led on by that cruel voice.

"Do it. Take me," Toya begged, as saliva flowed from his mouth. He had forgotten even to swallow.

Until he'd met Hodaka, he had never known about the debauched side of his personality. Before, he would have said he had a low sex drive, that he could live without sex. But now, he wanted Hodaka, wanted to feel him, was terrified that Hodaka might leave. Toya didn't care if that meant he was broken, as long as he was with Hodaka. He didn't even care if Hodaka was the one who broke him.

"All right," Hodaka whispered kindly. He thrust roughly into Toya's body. His shaft pushed far inside the tight flesh and Toya rocked his hips obscenely, inviting him further inside.

Toya heard the sloppy noise his body made as Hodaka thrust into his wet flesh and shook his head in shame again and again. But Toya's lewdly trembling body clung to Hodaka despite itself, holding Hodaka inside so that Toya could sate his desire.

"Is it that good?"

"Yes. Yes—so good," Toya nodded emphatically.

"Looks like it. You're holding me as tight as an animal. Tell me where you want it most."

"Inside—go—"

A filthy noise came from the place that joined their bodies as Hodaka pounded deeper, deep into the most sensitive part of Toya's body. Toya had spread open for him and Hodaka had sunk in to violate him.

It felt so good—too good—and Toya thought he would lose his mind.

"Ah! Ngh—wait—"

"Why?"

Even though it didn't hurt, tears welled up in Toya's eyes and rolled down his cheeks. But he still wrapped his slender legs around Hodaka's waist, dragging him deeper inside.

"I—I'm going to come…again," Toya answered haltingly, and he heard a quiet chuckle against his ear as Hodaka bent over him.

"Then come. Come as much as you want."

Toya's body, liquid with a flurry of passion and pleasure, was penetrated to its core. His mind went blank. His body trembled in waves and, unable to take any more, fluid poured out of him.

"Sir—please, come…"

Toya's thoughts were only a haze of pleasure and he could barely form words into sentences. He could only utter that simple plea, sobbing. He wanted Hodaka to experience pleasure with *his* body, with *his* flesh. Because Toya loved him. He loved Hodaka more than anyone else.

## Chapter Two

Toya's body felt heavy and lazy the second time he woke up, much later that morning. The dull ache in his hips told a clear story of his activities the night before. He had a feeling he'd begged outrageously since his body was always so shameless with Hodaka.

Toya found his own lewdness pathetic. While he was lost in the moment, he was all right. He could forget everything and just go along with all the perversities he did with Hodaka.

The problems came afterward: the following morning.

Toya heard the door open and lazily opened his eyes. Hodaka, in jeans and a sweater, sat down on the edge of Toya's bed and gazed down at him.

"Mister Hodaka," Toya said, but was too embarrassed about what had happened the night before, to say anything more than a simple, "good morning."

Of course, it wasn't the first time he had slept with Hodaka, but he had never imagined that the day would come when he would be too embarrassed to look his lover in the eye the next day.

"You weren't in any hurry to wake up," Hodaka said. He didn't seem upset, in fact, his expression was kind as he gazed into Toya's eyes.

"I'm sorry. Do you want me to make you

something to eat?" Hodaka asked.

"No, I can at least make a salad."

"A salad?"

Toya looked up at Hodaka and felt a ticklish sensation in his belly. The man wrote such incredible novels and looked so stylish, but he was incompetent at daily life. When it came to cooking, he could barely even manage a salad. But, in spite of that, whenever Toya stayed the night, Hodaka always wanted to cook something. The first time Toya had seen one of Hodaka's salads, he had laughed out loud.

"You must be hungry," Hodaka said.

"I am."

"Then rest a little longer while I make breakfast. You still look a bit weak."

Hodaka left the room, leaving Toya alone. Toya looked at a clock and saw it was past ten o'clock. Normally, he would be awake and getting ready to go to work at this hour. Thinking that, Toya suddenly remembered his reason for going to Hayama, to pick up Hodaka's new manuscript!

Not only had he wanted Hodaka so badly that he'd made a desperate confession of his feelings, he had forgotten all about his job and enticed the man into bed rather than go straight home.

*What am I going to do now?*

That was all Toya could think. He wasn't strong enough to take a professional tone with Hodaka when he went downstairs. But the reason he had come was for the new manuscript. The work that he had never stopped yearning for, that he believed he could trade his body and his pride to obtain.

What sort of world had Hodaka created in his latest novel?

These thoughts gradually made Toya frantic. He needed to read it as soon as possible. He needed to experience the unique world that Hodaka had created.

Toya was the only person who could read the manuscript before anyone else. He had been a huge fan of Kai Hodaka since his days as a student, and because he was the man's editor, he would be the very first person to read the new novel, *Emergence*.

Toya had been forced to swallow so much of his pride to get this far, but it had been necessary to deal with Hodaka through a mask of professionalism.

Toya got up, careful with his sore body, and went into the guest bathroom to wash his face. The suit Toya had worn the night before was hanging neatly on a hanger. He also saw a sweater and stonewashed jeans draped on a chair next to the bed.

Toya took that as a sign that the clothes were meant for him, so he dressed himself in the borrowed clothes. Hodaka didn't come to the house very often, but the spare clothes were still clean and smelled of sunlight. They were one size too big for Toya—so they probably belonged to Hodaka.

"Aren't you going to eat?"

"Oh! Yes!"

Hodaka called to Toya, opening the door once more, and Toya stood up hurriedly. He was used to their bedroom play, but his hips still ached dully.

"If you can't move, I can bring it in to you."

"I'm fine."

Toya put a smile on his face and went out into the hall ahead of Hodaka, trying to convince him that he wasn't sore. Hodaka didn't seem like the sort of person to deliberately misconstrue things, but Toya didn't want Hodaka to think that anything was out of the ordinary.

The breakfast nook was as well maintained as the rest of the house, and something that looked like brunch was set out on a round table. The menu was coffee, salad, blackened toast, and…

"What's this?"

Toya pointed hesitantly at a plate that offered an unsightly mass. Hodaka cast a glance at it. "I tried to cook some eggs in the microwave."

Hodaka's answer was completely calm, even though the eggs had exploded into a mess from the microwave. Toya couldn't dredge up the lie to say the eggs looked delicious, even to be polite. Nor could he scold Hodaka about the danger of cooking eggs in a microwave. All he could do was sit down at the table and stare at the food in front of him.

"Try some," Hodaka said.

"All right," Toya said and picked up a fork to take an experimental bite of the eggs. But he clamped his mouth shut at the bizarre taste.

"What do you think?"

"It's…interesting."

"I see."

Toya wasn't sure how Hodaka had taken his response. All Hodaka did was shrug his shoulders slightly—and that was their only conversation during the meal as Toya tried to finish the salad and eggs.

Toya felt eyes on him again and again, and every time he looked up, he met Hodaka's gaze resting steadily on him. The thought of the man's eyes on him sent a melting sort of thrill through his body. He remembered the sound of Hodaka's voice when he'd whispered "I love you," and it made him happy.

*He doesn't look like he's going to mention it.*

After what happened yesterday, Toya was hesitant to bring up the subject of the manuscript. He thought it would be too awkward and would make Hodaka resent him. He felt like he was at a disadvantage, since he had seduced Hodaka.

He wanted the manuscript, but if he brought it up, the trip would just go back to being about business. He was reluctant to put an end to their time together, so he decided to wait until after they ate to bring it up.

When Toya finished eating, his heart was still muddled. But he buckled down, tried to forget about the day before and got ready to discuss work as they cleared away the dishes and Hodaka started making coffee.

"Sir?" Toya began, "I'm sorry for the way I behaved yesterday."

"What do you mean?"

"I came here on business, but then I put my personal feelings first."

"Ah." Hodaka nodded, seeming uninterested. "You don't need to apologize for that."

"Maybe not, but…I should have tended to business first," Toya cut himself off suddenly, feeling embarrassed, and then looked up. "If it's all right, I'd like to take care of that now."

"Go ahead."

"Do you think you could get your new manuscript to me soon?"

"That again?"

Hodaka's response was completely uninterested.

"I do need to get back to the office," Toya said, feeling a piercing pain shoot through his heart. He didn't want to leave Hodaka and go back to his office at all. He wished he could stay with him forever.

"That's true. I'll think about it," Hodaka said indifferently, draining his coffee.

He would think about it…?

The moment Toya heard those words, his mind went white. He didn't have time to share a leisurely brunch with Hodaka. They had to publish his new book by March. That was the whole reason Toya had come here.

Toya had gone straight to bed the night before without checking his cell phone for messages, but the assistant editor Makihara might have called him to find out how things had gone. If Toya were in a more remote area, he could make the excuse that his phone had no reception, but that wouldn't work since he was in Hayama.

Normally, the file would have been sent by e-mail, but Hodaka had refused to submit the manuscript to anyone but Toya. Makihara had been worried about how things were going with them, and he would want to know if Toya had managed to get the manuscript or not.

Toya also considered that if he went back to the office without the manuscript, everyone would think that he had been skipping out on work. Toya had such pride in his job that he wanted to avoid anything that might affect his performance reviews.

"Do you think you could give it to me today?" Toya asked, but just then, his telephone rang, interrupting them. "Excuse me. Let's talk about it in a minute."

Toya stood up, and Hodaka just nodded.

"Hello, Mister Makihara?"

Toya was embarrassed to take a business call in front of Hodaka, so he went into the bathroom to talk to Makihara.

"Hey, what's going on? I didn't hear from you yesterday, so I was starting to wonder."

Just as Toya had expected, Makihara had left not only a text message on his phone, but also three messages on his voicemail trying to find out what had happened.

"I'm sorry, things were really busy. Mister Hodaka says he still can't turn in the manuscript."

"Seriously?" The disappointment in Makihara's voice was blatant.

"It seems there are some sections of the book that he considers problematic."

It was a feeble lie.

If he said that Hodaka had lost any desire to submit the manuscript, he would need to tell Makihara what had happened, so Toya just avoided the topic altogether.

"How strange. You can't do anything to get it from him?"

"I think it's ready for submission, but…it will be difficult. Anyway, I should be at the office this afternoon."

Toya didn't want to upset Hodaka any more than he already had, so he brought his conversation to an end. Hodaka had already seemed in a bad mood before the call, as though he was being deliberately difficult. The atmosphere was tense, and Toya didn't feel like he could discuss the manuscript.

Maybe he was just being petty. But Hodaka had said he would give Toya the manuscript. That was why he had left work early and come all the way out to Hayama. And then for Hodaka to tell Toya he wouldn't give him the manuscript—there was no way Toya could accept that as a professional, even though it was Toya who had confessed his feelings to Hodaka and mixed professional and personal issues on this business trip.

As if that weren't enough, Toya knew that if it weren't for work, he would stay for days with Hodaka. But he was a professional, so he had to put his duty first. He had to stand up to Hodaka from time to time.

Gentle Toya was the type of person who kept his stress bundled up inside and exercised strong self-control. He had almost never confronted anyone out of anger, but that didn't mean he didn't get angry.

He wanted to tell himself, *don't hesitate; just do what needs to be done.*

But if he said that now, he sensed that it would only result in Hodaka not giving him the manuscript. Even though Hodaka had demanded that Toya come to him before he would hand the manuscript over, it seemed uncharacteristically petty of Hodaka to do that.

Hodaka would never lie so horribly and say that he had finished the manuscript when he hadn't. But after their conversation, Toya began to have doubts.

"Toya, do you feel all right?"

When Toya heard Hodaka speak up, he hurriedly pushed the button on his cell phone to end the call. Makihara may have been very open-minded, but Toya couldn't reveal his relationship with Hodaka to anyone. If Makihara heard Hodaka speaking to him so familiarly, it would expose everything.

"Yes, I'm coming."

He pushed the cell phone into his pocket and hurried out of the bathroom to see that Hodaka seemed to be in a better mood than earlier. He looked at Toya and smiled.

"It's a nice day. How about we go out? You haven't seen the sea yet, have you?"

"Huh?"

"Or I could show you my theater."

Both of those suggestions sounded good to Toya. And, most importantly, they would let him stay with the man he loved. But Hodaka's manuscript, which he wanted so badly, was being dangled in front of his eyes.

"What's wrong? Are you sure you're all right?" Hodaka asked.

"I'm fine. I was just thinking about the manuscript."

"It's all finished. You don't need to worry about it."

When Toya heard that, he fell silent. If Hodaka acknowledged that the manuscript was finished, that just made everything worse. Why wouldn't Hodaka give it to him?

"Are you being mean?" Toya asked.

"What?"

The words were out of Toya's mouth before he realized it, and he shook his head quickly.

"Nothing."

Toya walked up to a window and casually pulled aside its lace curtain. Sunlight came pouring in. There were a lot of evergreens in the garden, making it look lush, like a forest. The place was simply too luxuriant. Toya felt as if he would forget the passage of time. Maybe that was why Hodaka couldn't understand Toya's impatience for the manuscript. The house was protected from the normal flow of time.

"Let's go to the theater, then," Hodaka said.

"But—"

It went against Toya's desire not to budge an inch until Hodaka gave him the manuscript, but he could only follow where Hodaka led him. When Toya nodded reluctantly, he thought he could see Hodaka relaxing.

The theater was underground and made of concrete, which kept the room freezing cold. There seemed to be a heater, but it couldn't keep up with the cold, so Toya shivered uncontrollably.

Hodaka looked at him and murmured, "Are you cold?" He laid an arm around Toya's shoulders.

"Aren't you cold, too?"

"I didn't really notice."

In some ways, Hodaka could be much more obtuse than other people. For instance, did he not see that Toya was growing ever more impatient to read his manuscript? Toya wanted it so badly he could have died.

Toya sat down in one of the seats in the cramped room and Hodaka started fiddling with a machine. Finally, a monochrome image was projected onto the screen. It was *Waterloo Bridge*, a wartime romance movie. Toya felt himself getting sucked into the movie before Hodaka had even sat down beside him. Toya stared at the screen, mesmerized, and beside him Hodaka sighed.

"What is it?" Toya spoke in a whisper, as if he were in a movie theater.

"It's no fun if you only pay attention to the movie," Hodaka answered.

Toya thought that if that was the case, then Hodaka shouldn't have suggested a movie. He looked over at Hodaka, a little annoyed at having his appreciation of the movie interrupted, but the man was smiling.

"Don't worry about it, just watch the movie."

"But you just said—"

"It's fine."

Hodaka pressed his lips to Toya's cheek and then to his lips. Toya soon forgot all about the movie and wrapped his arms around Hodaka's neck, reveling in kisses that were more than a match for the tender romance playing out on the screen before them.

When the movie ended, Toya didn't really remember any of the story. It was almost afternoon and his deadline was fast approaching. He had worked out his route and the time it would take to get from there to Tokyo, so when Toya returned to the living room he opened his mouth to speak halfheartedly.

"Um…"

"Do you know how to play chess?" Hodaka asked suddenly, and Toya's eyes widened.

"Chess, sir?"

"You don't know it?"

"No, I know what it is, but…" The suggestion was so sudden that Toya was at a loss.

"What are the rules?"

"I can't list them."

"Perfect. You'll pick it up faster in a real game. I'll go get a board."

"What? Hold on—" Toya shouted, not wanting to be forced into a chess game. He wanted to get his hands on Hodaka's manuscript. Even though Toya was tolerant to a fault, he was beginning to get annoyed from the constant teasing. He had gone there for business.

"From now on, we can enjoy things together."

From now on? Was Hodaka planning on holding Toya hostage forever with the promise of the manuscript?

"There's some wind now, so we'll take a walk this evening. That leaves time for chess now."

"But I—"

Hodaka chuckled as Toya trailed off.

"You have some other plans?"

Toya had too many other plans to count. Even so, he shook his head in resignation, figuring that he shouldn't upset Hodaka any further.

If Toya didn't have any obligations, the talk of chess and evening walks would be much more attractive. But he didn't have time to get lost in a dream world. He had to get Hodaka's manuscript. Toya had to keep that goal foremost in his mind, but he had begun to realize that Hodaka was keeping his manuscript on purpose.

Why was he doing something so immature?

Toya learned the basics of chess over two long hours, occasionally punctuated by a sharp pain in his stomach. He was truly reaching the limits of his patience.

"Would you like some tea?"

"You're going to make tea?"

"Yes."

Unlike at his home in Tokyo, Hodaka had no maid in Hayama. The housekeeper only came to help when he stayed, but even that was only twice a day, in the morning and evening, so Hodaka still had to take care of the little details himself. It seemed very inconvenient, and that put silly ideas into Toya's head, like coming here to help Hodaka when he had time off.

"I'll make it," Toya offered. Hodaka was so clumsy he might actually burn himself if he tried to make the tea.

"If you insist."

Just then, the cell phone in Toya's pocket vibrated to announce a new text message. Toya went into the kitchen and quickly checked it. It was a short message from Makihara: *We got cut off suddenly. Is everything okay?*

*Was* everything okay? It would be impossible to explain the situation in a text message, but if he called Makihara, Hodaka might overhear him. Toya struggled over how to answer. He started to write a response when suddenly a hand reached past him.

He was surprised by the hand, but even more so as his phone was snatched from his hands. Hodaka folded it back up without looking at the screen, utterly cool.

"If you want to use your phone you don't need to sneak around. You could do that in front of me."

"I was just sending a text message for work, but since I'm off-duty here, I—I feel like I'm being rude," Toya said, though he realized how illogical the excuse sounded.

"Stuff for work, hm?" Hodaka muttered derisively. He raised his eyes slowly and Toya realized what a mistake he had made. He had just revealed that he'd been thinking about work the entire time.

"So, even though you're with me, all you're thinking about is work?"

Hodaka sounded hurt, but his face remained distant. He always looked like that when they were together. Toya wasn't going to be absurd and tell him to look ecstatic with joy, but it bothered him that Hodaka always looked so sad. It made his heart ache.

Toya wanted to stay. He wanted to be with Hodaka. He had even confessed his feelings to Hodaka. To be honest, he didn't want to think about work at all. But once Toya's control slipped, he would never be able to leave. If he didn't control himself, things would never be the same again.

"I came here to get your manuscript, sir. I never expected the situation to develop as it did, but my first responsibility is my job. So I can't help but think about it, can I?"

Toya had to speak calmly. He had to find out why Hodaka had changed his mind about handing over the manuscript and whether it was complete or not.

"I suppose you're right."

But Hodaka's answer was so infuriatingly dry. Things didn't seem to be going well and that only angered Toya more.

"I'm begging you. Please, give me the manuscript," Toya said and bent into a deep bow.

"You're cute even when you're serious," Hodaka murmured, a faint, ironic smile twisting a corner of his mouth.

Heat thrilled through Toya's body, as if a paintbrush had just tickled a line of sensuality down his spine. Hodaka's voice was always shockingly erotic.

"Please stop joking around like that. I need it for work."

"I'm sure you do. If it weren't for your job, you wouldn't have come here, right?"

Hodaka made the word "job" sound like a slur, like he was mocking Toya for putting his feelings ahead of his work. For a moment, Toya had no idea how to respond.

"You wouldn't have asked me to come here if it weren't for work, either."

"If you want to come here, I will invite you anytime. But since you're here now, would you like to see my grandfather's collection of paintings?"

"It's not the paintings that I came here to see."

"How about the garden?"

Toya didn't want to see the paintings or the garden, he didn't need to know about them; it was only Hodaka's manuscript that he cared about.

Was Hodaka just playing with Toya? Toya didn't even want to consider something so ridiculous, but seeing Hodaka acting so unlike himself caused the doubt to take control in his mind. Thanks to that, the words that Toya should have kept buried in his heart came flying out of him without his control.

"Are you having fun torturing me, sir?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that it seems like you're amusing yourself by frustrating me."

"I leave it up to you to interpret my actions."

Hodaka threw back a curt answer and Toya's patience finally snapped.

"So what is it you're trying to get from me? You want me to tell you that I'll do anything to get the manuscript?"

"Calm down," Hodaka cut in, trying to soothe Toya, but his words were useless against Toya's anger. If Hodaka had offered just a word of apology, that would have been enough. But he accepted Toya's anger as if it were perfectly natural. That detachment only infuriated Toya further.

"Fine," Toya said, his voice tense with restraint, glaring at Hodaka. Toya usually had a very calm disposition, but when he got truly angry, he lost all self-control.

"Toya?"

"I'm done. You can burn your manuscript if you want to."

Toya was getting extreme. He just couldn't understand why Hodaka had to be so cruel to him. There were limits to how much a person could take being tormented and mocked by someone they loved, and Toya had reached that limit. But his desperate confession had turned out so well that it had borne him up under Hodaka's unusual cruelty.

"Toya."

Hodaka called his name a second time, his seductive voice slightly ambiguous, but Toya couldn't give him a second chance. He needed to calm down first. He went up to the bedroom on the second floor and changed quickly before slipping on his jacket. He was wearing his shirt for the second day in a row and it was limp, but there was nothing he could do about it. It bothered him to just leave the clothes he had borrowed lying there, so he decided to take them home and have them cleaned before returning them.

He would have asked for a paper bag to carry them in, but he doubted that someone as indifferent as Hodaka would know such mundane details about his summer home. So instead, he folded the clothes up and carried them in his arms as he walked to the door. He pulled on his shoes and opened the door, where he was met by a blast of winter air.

He'd had more than enough of Hodaka's selfishness. He loved Hodaka, more than he could stand, but…

Toya was serious about his feelings, and he didn't have time to get the runaround from Hodaka about them.

The trip to the station felt horribly long.

Hodaka had taken Toya's cell phone, so he called the editorial office at a pay phone and told Makihara a new lie; that there were still parts of the manuscript that Hodaka wanted to correct, so he had decided to get it another day.

If he revealed that he still couldn't get the manuscript from Hodaka after so much time, they would treat Toya like he was incompetent and tell him not to give up until he got the manuscript from Hodaka. But Toya was in no mood to face the man.

Since Toya had first come to the house by taxi, the trip back seemed much further. He happened across a convenience store along the way and bought some hot coffee and a paper bag for the borrowed clothes. When he asked the way to the station and found out how far away it was, he was crestfallen. He would have to hail a taxi just to get back.

When Toya had first arrived in Hayama, he had been filled with anticipation and excitement as well as stress and resignation; now he only felt depressed.

"It's freezing."

A single cup of hot coffee turned out to be little help in taking the chill out of the ocean breeze. But the cold did help him calm down.

When Hodaka said he loved Toya, Toya believed him. He didn't want to believe that Hodaka, who was honest to a fault, had broken his principles just to torment him. But then why wouldn't Hodaka give him the manuscript? Toya couldn't understand it.

As he descended a long hill and walked in the direction he'd been told, Toya caught sight of a car parked on the side of the road. He saw a tall man leaning against the driver's side door and realized it was Hodaka. He was wearing a trench coat and, as always, was captivatingly handsome and stylish.

"You could have just told me you were leaving. It takes a while to get to the station by bus or taxi, let alone on foot."

"But—"

"I think you should stop making excuses. You're not a child."

Being scolded reminded Toya once again that Hodaka was eight years older.

"I'll take you to the station. Get in," Hodaka said, and then slid into the driver's seat.

Toya felt that it would damage their relationship if he refused, so he nodded timidly. When he opened the door to get in, he saw a large envelope sitting on the passenger's seat and his heart skipped a beat.

"Is this—?"

"It's my manuscript. That's what you wanted, wasn't it?" Hodaka spoke nonchalantly, smiling slightly.

Toya's cell phone sat on top of the envelope and he picked them both up and slid into the seat while he stared at the envelope in shock.

"I think that makes the perfect gift for you," Hodaka said, his voice horribly detached. Toya thought it sounded colder than usual.

"But—"

"You don't want it?"

"No, I'm taking it with me!" Toya said, clutching the envelope to his chest and forgetting his anger at Hodaka.

"What a disappointment," Hodaka murmured. "Looks like you have no use for me once you get your manuscript."

*Impossible.* Toya felt like he was reading a code in Hodaka's tone.

"That's not true."

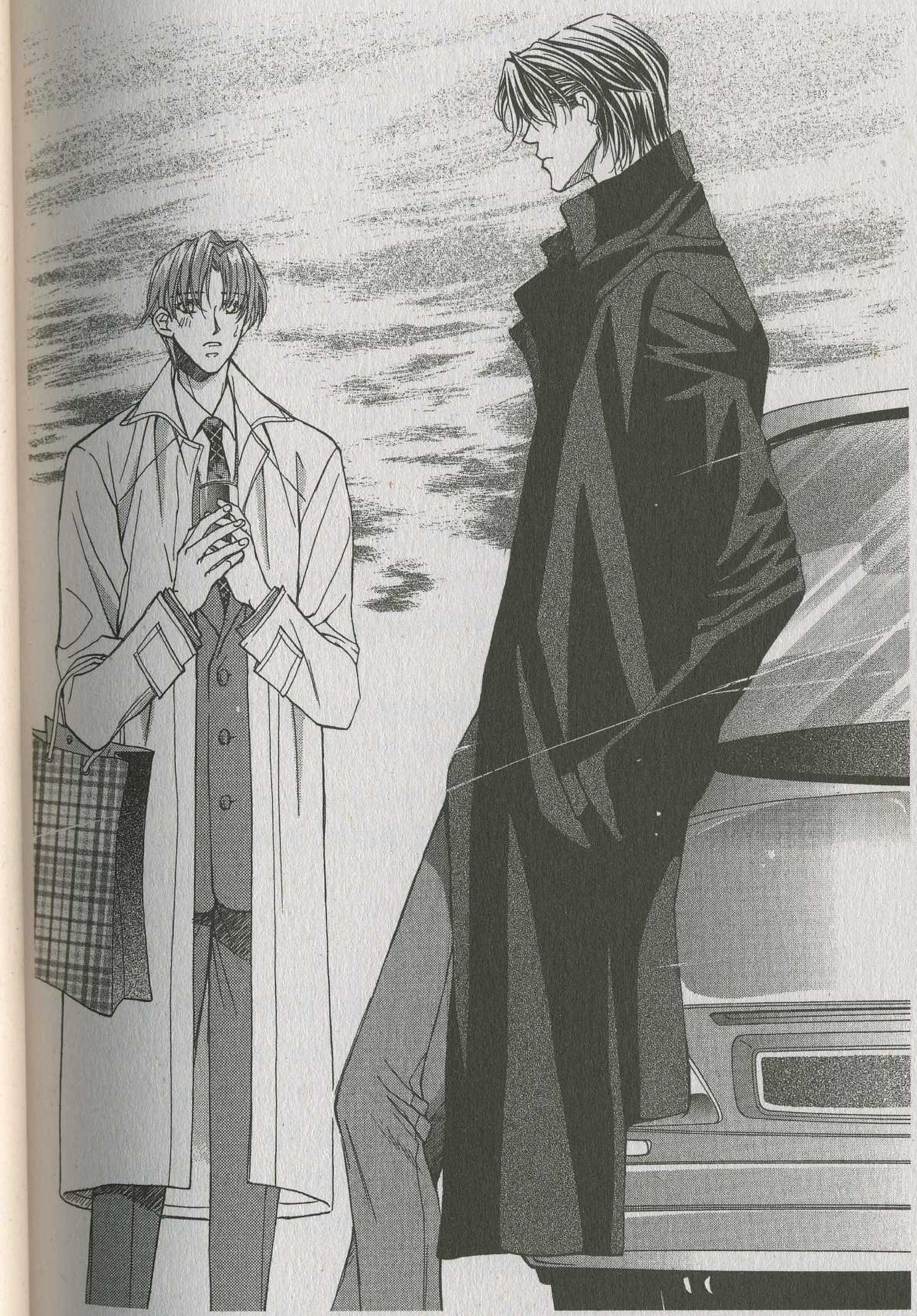
Each word sent ripples through Toya's heart, like leaves touching the surface of a lake. That alone brought peace back to Toya's heart. Maybe Hodaka hadn't been torturing him deliberately; he'd just been insecure. Had he felt sad, seeing Toya always put his work first? Toya was moved by this unassuming childishness deep inside the older man.

"Sir, were you…sulking?"

"I told you to interpret my actions however you like."

That answer was so typical of Hodaka.

"I'm not you, sir. I can't be sure if I have the right



answer or not. But if it were me, I would tell the other person that I wanted them to stay another night. That way they would know how to handle the situation, too."

"I see."

A traffic light turned red and Hodaka slowly stepped on the brake.

"It hurts me to leave you, sir. It makes me sad. I want to stay with the person I love—I wish I never had to leave. But I knew that I would have to go back when you gave me this, so it was hard for me to mention work."

Hodaka didn't answer.

"But I have to do my job, so I was trying to be strong."

As Toya described his feelings, he prayed Hodaka would understand.

"I'll remember that," Hodaka murmured, stepping on the gas once more.

The two were silent for a while. Toya had trouble thinking of what to say in such a tense atmosphere.

"We're here," Hodaka said.

"Oh…thank you for the ride."

"Take care."

Hodaka didn't try to keep Toya from leaving, so Toya got out of the car, locking away his sadness. Now he knew what it felt like to be unable to walk away from something. Hodaka had even revealed his immaturity, for nothing. Because of that, Toya knew he was being a fool to waver between his professionalism and his feelings, but he couldn't help himself.

As Toya walked away, Hodaka suddenly called out behind him, "Mister Makihara called, by the way. It looks like my manuscript is late."

Toya was silent.

"If you take it to the office tomorrow morning, it should be fine."

Toya was shocked. He knew that Hodaka had a strict policy to never lie, but could he use the lie that Toya had told?

Seeing Toya's mouth fall open in shock, Hodaka smirked.

"Do I have to invite you again before you'll come stay with me?"

Without a word, Toya climbed back into the car and stared at Hodaka, who murmured, "When you act like this, I don't want to let you go. So it's all your fault."

Toya didn't know what sort of expression would be right, so all he did was whisper, "Do whatever you want."

Then, no longer able to hold back, Toya finally smiled.

# Chapter Three

The next morning, Toya went to work several hours early, carrying the manuscript that Hodaka had made him work so hard for. He was eager to read it as soon as he could, but he was even more eager to sit down and read it in leisurely, solitary quiet.

He had only wound up missing one day of work, but that absence meant he was behind on his projects. Once he'd cleaned up the faxes and phone messages left on his desk, he turned decisively to Hodaka's manuscript and opened the envelope.

The title was *Emergence.*

Just from reading the opening lines, Toya knew the book was very different from Hodaka's usual style. The setting was 1950s Tokyo and the protagonist a boy in his early teens. That alone was unusual for Hodaka's novels. It might have been his first attempt.

As Toya read, he could feel the blood rushing into his cheeks. He'd thought it would be a mystery, but instead, it was turning out to be a romance. But it was more than a simple love story: there was a meaty mystery plot twisted in as well. Toya thought it could be labeled a "romance novel," as well, with its tale of immature, unsullied love.

As he read through the story, he bit back his internal commentary and became enthralled. Luckily, none of his coworkers were at the office yet and no one called, so Toya read on, uninterrupted. He turned the pages with trembling fingertips, throwing himself, full of wonder, into the world Hodaka had created.

The middle of the book surged uneasily ahead into sudden developments; it was like riding over a rough sea. Then it charged straight into an unexpected reversal for a moving finish. The final scene was so beautiful and deeply affecting that it made Toya's heart ache dully. He thought he might cry.

*No—*

Toya had thought Hodaka's style was as sharp and unfeeling as a knife, so the transformation in his writing was an intense surprise. He didn't want anyone else to read this amazing, passionate, intense tale of love.

How had Hodaka written something like this? How could he have created such a story? The thoughts filled Toya's heart and he suddenly flushed with realization.

Was it because he had met Toya? Had he written this poignant story because Toya was with him? Toya didn't know Hodaka's thoughts, but he wanted to believe that.

"Morning, Sakurai. You're here early."

"Oh, good morning," Toya said in surprise, bowing politely to his coworker, Yoshikawa.

"What's up? Your face is all flushed."

"Er—is it really?"

"Catch a cold? The wind off the ocean is pretty harsh in Hayama. Mister Makihara was worried about you." Even such a frivolous conversation made Toya nervous.

"No, I didn't go out much."

"Oh, that's true. And did you manage to get Hodaka's manuscript?"

"I just finished reading it, so I have to write back to him."

"Oh, sorry to interrupt."

The novel made it even harder for Toya to leave Hodaka. He was captivated, driven wild by the man's words. He couldn't move.

Hodaka hadn't simply been sulking, he had been embarrassed. There wasn't any other reason for Hodaka to have been so hesitant about turning over the manuscript. Even Kai Hodaka suffered from such erratic emotions, just like anyone else.

Drunk on his trifling discovery, Toya felt fidgety. He stood up from his desk and took out his cell phone, trying to think of how to start the conversation.

*I miss you?*

*Where are you right now?*

Or maybe…

"Hello, this is Hodaka."

When Toya heard the gorgeous voice tickling at his ear, he felt a surging wave of joy as he opened his mouth.

# *Felony*

## *Chapter One*

Awoken by a sunbeam that spilled through a gap in the blinds, Toya Sakurai couldn't help smiling at the sight of the man who slept beside him. Mornings like this, when Toya awoke before his lover Kai Hodaka, were rare. Normally, Hodaka woke earlier than him and would make breakfast.

They had been lovers for six full months.

Illuminated by the morning sunlight, the features of Hodaka's face cast striking shadows and made him even more handsome. Toya was hopelessly captivated. The man beside him, the most popular author of his generation, was blessed with a handsome face and a gorgeous voice.

That was Hodaka.

Being thirty-six years old only made him sexier. When they held meetings in public, the eyes of people on the street all turned to him.

Was he handsome or was he beautiful? Toya had no words to describe Hodaka's attractiveness, and it frustrated him.

Suddenly the man's eyelashes fluttered and he opened his eyes. He fixed his gaze on Toya and smiled.

"Good morning."

"Um, good morning, sir."

Toya's heart skipped a beat at the unexpected sight of the man's fresh expression. Toya stiffened, unable to look away. He didn't want Hodaka to know that he had been staring at him.

Hodaka sat up and reached for Toya's cheek. His fingers brushed the skin of his face, and then fell to his bare shoulder. Toya felt his touch through a haze.

"Mister Hodaka?"

Hodaka said nothing as he leaned over Toya and kissed him on the lips. Every morning they shared together, the two tasted this moment of supreme happiness. Toya felt his reason slipping away.

Hodaka devoured Toya's lips like a starving man. When Toya slipped, powerless, back onto the bed, Hodaka gazed down at him and whispered, "Go take a shower. I'll make your breakfast."

There was something haughty in the man's tone that complimented his stunningly deep voice and made it hard to disobey him. But Toya was learning to be strong and he shook his head.

"No—I want you to try my cooking sometimes, too."

Hodaka shrugged and pressed his lips to Toya's temple.

"You should get my smell off of you before you go to work."

"We're on flextime."

"You're so determined to disobey me. You want to go back to your place and change, don't you?"

Hodaka's voice was taunting and Toya hung his head in embarrassment.

"I can offer you two choices," Hodaka murmured.

He lifted Toya's chin with his fingertips and covered Toya's lips with his own.

"What are they?" Toya asked.

"You can either stay home from work today, or you can go in after you eat what I cook for you."

Hodaka's kiss sent a roaring fire through Toya's body, all the way into his fingertips. The kiss was so deep, he felt like he was drinking Hodaka's breath. But after sharing that feeling several more times, Toya looked up at Hodaka through his eyelashes.

"Not fair."

"How is that unfair?"

"I can't stay home from work. There's a project meeting with the sales department today. Besides, I already stayed this weekend."

"Then you only have one choice."

Hodaka saw the unusual tinge of annoyance on Toya's face and he gave a rare, placid smile. He brought his face closer and Toya shut his eyes, just as the man laid a kiss on his eyelids.

"You're the one who wants to go to work all week, so we can go out this weekend," Hodaka said.

"Aren't you behind on your proofreading for Six Winds anyway, sir?" Toya was even willing to bring up the name of his company's rival to make his argument, but he could see that Hodaka had won. When Hodaka kissed him again, he was overcome by the illusion that he was melting into a puddle. Hodaka tilted Toya's chin up slightly and slipped his tongue into Toya's mouth. It was a passionate way to say good morning, and Toya felt an ache in his lower body.

"Mm—"

*No.*

His reason flashed a warning to him, but his mind was frozen.

Hodaka hadn't actually said anything to convince him, but he didn't need to use words: he could bring Toya to his knees with tender kisses alone.

"Sir—"

Toya sensed his voice growing sweet and thick like honey as he clung to Hodaka's neck.

"Ow—"

After Toya had finished eating Hodaka's brunch—just like Hodaka had wanted—he'd gone back home to change. They had messed around all morning, so Toya hurt everywhere. As he walked through the entrance to Sozan Publishing, he let out a sigh. He still had that meeting with sales in the afternoon.

He greeted his coworker at the reception desk, and then got into the elevator. He had prepared himself for what he would see, but his breath caught anyway.

The elevator rose to the editing departments, and inside there was a poster advertising Hodaka's books with a photo of the man on it. Toya couldn't help but feel embarrassed every time he saw it.

Hodaka was a big moneymaker for Sozan Publishing, and his book *Emergence*, which he had published last year, had become a standard that

cemented his reputation. He had swept the literary and entertainment awards, and people whispered that the novel could become a new classic of Japanese literature.

Hodaka was currently working on a second novel with Toya as his editor, but he hadn't told Toya whether the book would be a continuation of the first or something entirely new.

Toya knew that he had nothing to worry about with Hodaka. Every book Hodaka wrote had sold explosively, and now, thanks to *Emergence,* his earlier works were selling again. Hodaka was well-informed about his fan levels and he was very involved in strategizing how best to sell his stories.

Toya got out of the elevator, stifling all his emotions so as not to look weak, and then headed into the office.

The pulp division of Sozan Publishing dealt mostly with light, pocket paperback novels, with Toya editing for ten of their authors. When he'd first joined the company, he had been in the literature department; when he'd switched to the pulp division, they had tried not to give him too many authors during his adjustment period. But when word got around that he had wrested an amazing manuscript out of Hodaka, he had been given responsibility for discovering new authors and also the management of second-string writers.

"Good morning, Toya," Yoshimi Fujiwara, a part-time worker, said to him.

Toya smiled.

"Good morning."

"You look like you didn't get much sleep last night."

"D-do I?"

"You're so pale it shows right away."

Yoshimi had worked in the department longer than Toya, so she was up-to-date on most information. Her only flaw was that she was a bit talkative. But he was glad to have her around because she was good at her job and very attentive.

"Take care of yourself," Yoshimi said.

Toya sat at his desk, muttering, "If only you knew."

That weekend he was going with Hodaka on a combined research trip and meeting. Toya was true to form and had drawn up a schedule. He was looking forward to it a lot.

Hodaka could be an arrogant, heartless man who didn't treat people well at times. But on the other hand, he was honest, never broke a promise, and never told a lie. His thoughts were so rigidly organized that it was almost inhuman, but Toya couldn't help being drawn to him. He loved the man's awkwardness and his frigidity, and everything else about him. They'd had plenty of misunderstandings before, but Toya tried to enjoy the time he spent with Hodaka.

It was difficult though. Hodaka attracted attention wherever they went, so they couldn't go on dates in public. Instead, they would go out under the pretext of business meetings. Just the thought of it made Toya's chest tighten at his own cowardice.

Once they were out of Hodaka's apartment, they

wouldn't act familiar or talk to each other like lovers. Toya didn't know if that sort of relationship satisfied Hodaka or not, but it was all Toya could do.

# Chapter Two

Toya and Hodaka needed to decide when they were going to meet the following day. The long awaited weekend was so close, so Toya was in high spirits. All he needed to do was finish one galley proof, and the project would be done.

*The final proofs won't come until the beginning of the week,* he calculated, and then smiled to himself.

For the first time in too long, he would have Hodaka all to himself for the whole day. Being an author didn't guarantee two-day weekends, so when Hodaka was busy writing, they didn't have much time to spend together.

"Toya?"

Someone called Toya's name unexpectedly behind him, and Toya jumped. It was only Yoshimi, but he still felt embarrassed to have her see him look so surprised.

"Y-yes?"

"I thought I'd make some coffee before I go home. Do you want some?"

"I'd love some. Are you sure it's no trouble?"

Usually when someone wanted a drink, they made it themselves. The only exception was making tea for everyone when people visited the office. "It's fine. You're working late tonight, right? I'm going home in a few minutes anyway, so I don't mind helping."

All of Toya's efforts were the key to his weekend, though his work hadn't been progressing exactly to plan. He'd been unusually busy lately, though it might have just been his increased workload as his successes led to his editing for more authors

In particular, the new author he had discovered, Yo Amano, had built up a lot of popularity among young people and had written three novels in a very short span of time. His success meant he was publishing a two-part novel in two consecutive months, so Toya was pretty excited.

Because Toya enjoyed his job so much, he didn't find it difficult after all.

Hodaka had told him that he would show Toya the first draft of his new novel next month. The mere thought of it made Toya's heart flutter with excitement. Every day was full and sharp, and Toya believed that he was in the happiest time of his life.

"Here you go," Yoshimi said. She made strong coffee and Toya smiled as he accepted the cup from her.

Just then, Toya's cell phone started ringing and he grabbed it. The LCD screen displayed Hodaka's name. Toya felt that if he had a ring tone specifically for Hodaka it would reveal their relationship to everyone, so he kept the usual ring. Because of that, Hodaka's phone calls always seemed like a surprise.

"Hello?"

"Mister Sakurai?"

Hodaka's businesslike tone showed that he was being considerate of the fact that other people might be around.

"What can I do for you?"

What Hodaka said next cut straight to Toya's heart.

"I'm calling about tomorrow. I'm sorry, but something's come up."

"What?"

"I'm really sorry, but I need to cancel."

Hodaka said he was sorry, but his voice seemed to take it for granted that Toya would agree to cancel. He clearly would allow no argument.

"A-all right."

Toya's mouth was dry, but he managed to hide it. If he let Hodaka hear how disappointed he was, even Hodaka would feel guilty. Toya didn't want that. If Hodaka was giving this other matter priority when he always tried to keep his promises, then Toya knew he had a good reason for it. It would be immature to yell at him for that.

"We should do it some other time," Hodaka said.

"I'd like that," Toya answered, his voice hard before he hung up. His heart ached so much, he could feel it pushing through his shirt, about to rip in two. He knew the kind of man Hodaka was, and knew he would put business or private matters first.

"Is something wrong, Toya?"

Toya laughed at Yoshimi's question. "No, I'm fine."

"You look pale."

"It was an author asking me to extend his deadline," he explained, and then turned his eyes back to the proofs he was working on. But thanks to that phone call, he couldn't focus on his work at all; his eyes just skimmed blindly over the page.

Hodaka had to be brushing him off, but he couldn't do anything about it. He was sure that Hodaka had only canceled because he assumed Toya would be all right with it. He would have forgiven Toya if he'd canceled, so he assumed the same if things were the other way around.

But if they skipped tomorrow, Toya would still have work to do after that, so that meant he wouldn't be able to see Hodaka for a while. Hodaka had been busy lately, too, so they had only been exchanging e-mails and phone calls.

Toya was sad that he couldn't see the man he loved. He remembered the feeling of Hodaka's lips and touched his fingertips to his mouth. He wanted to kiss Hodaka so badly. He wished for his lips. For just one kiss, Toya thought he could forgive Hodaka. He thought it would erase his self-pity and his weakness, and everything else.

The next week began, and by Thursday, Toya still hadn't seen Hodaka.

He had tried to pass the time without thinking about anything, so the week had gone by in the blink of an eye. They had exchanged a few e-mails, but Hodaka seemed to be very busy, so the messages were always curt.

Toya didn't want to bother him, so he didn't send too many e-mails. Besides, Toya was crushed by his own workload, too.

That brisk pace had continued until yesterday.

Toya thought about giving Hodaka a call. An e-mail would be too empty of human touch, and most importantly, he had vital business to ask about: the progress of the manuscript. But after such a long hiatus, it was harder to get back in touch.

He was thinking it over very carefully when…

"Hello!"

Suddenly a cheerful voice poured into Toya's ears from overhead. Toya looked up.

"Mister Amano!"

Standing on the other side of the partition beside Toya's desk, grinning brightly, was Yo Amano, one of the authors Toya edited for.

Amano had lightened hair and several piercings in his ears. He had such a flashy appearance that Toya always thought of him as a typical fashionable twenty-something. But on the inside, Amano was unexpectedly deep. It seemed like so long ago that his tall, slender build and handsome face had made Toya mistake him for a model.

"It's been so long. How are you?" Toya asked, and he smiled brightly as Amano pulled his lips into a shy grin.

"Well—I was in the neighborhood, so I thought I'd drop by. I hope I'm not interrupting anything?"

"No, I finished my last project yesterday, so I've got some time."

"Yesterday? So we can miss our deadlines after all, huh?" Amano teased.

Toya took on a deliberately serious expression. "Of course not. We make different schedules for each author."

"I know, I know. You're so serious!" Amano laughed loudly.

"Well, if you have some time, we could have a meeting and get a bite to eat," Toya suggested.

Going home and eating all alone would be gloomy, so Toya wanted some company. Besides, Amano knew about Toya's relationship with Hodaka. He might be able to talk to the youth about it.

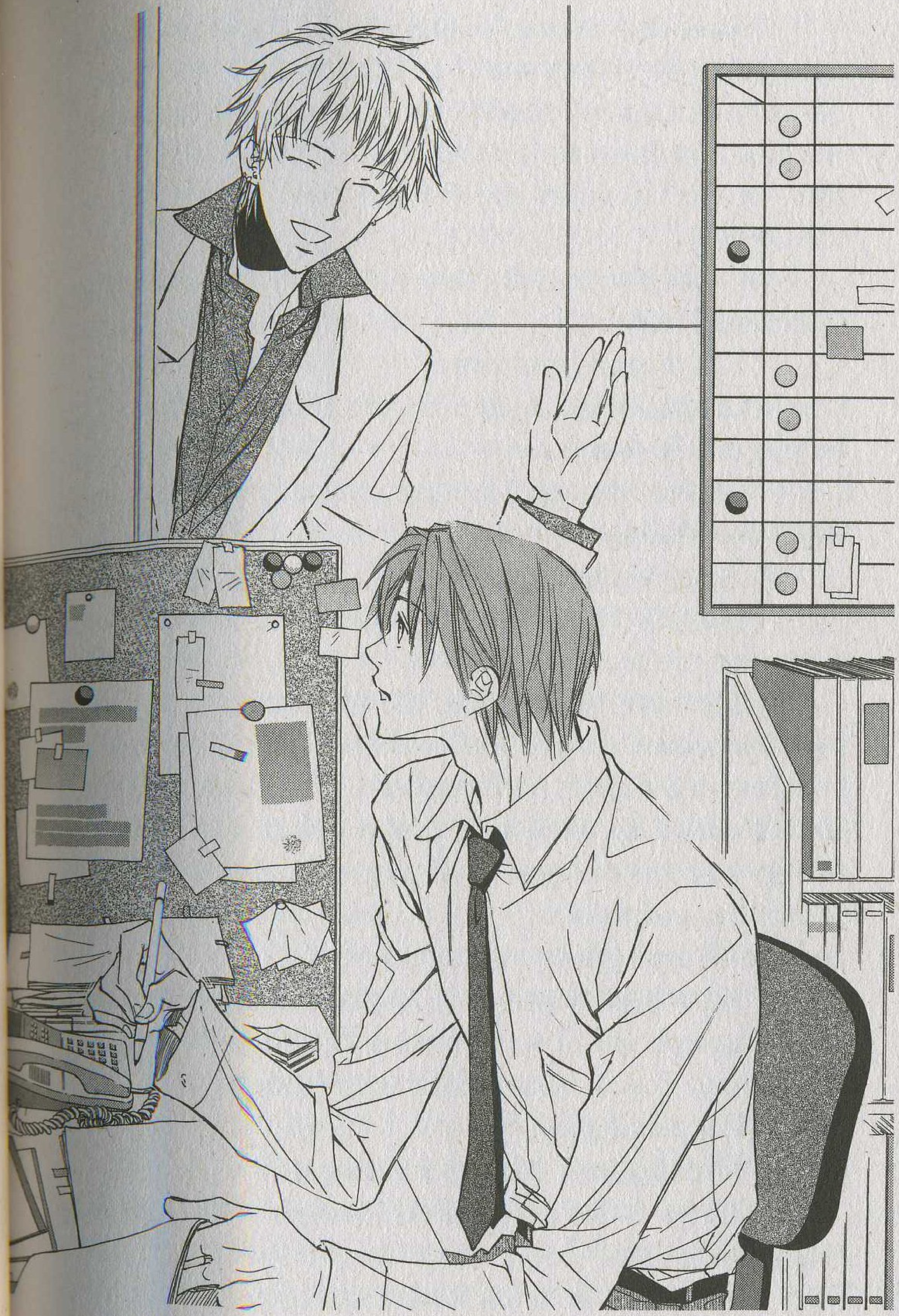
Amano smiled at Toya, apparently picking up on a strange atmosphere surrounding his editor.

"Well, you're twisting my arm, you know. When you're done with work, I'll be in that café where we met the first time."

"Thank you," Toya said, but Amano just shook his head. It wasn't a problem.

Toya didn't have anything specific he wanted to talk about. He just wanted someone to talk to. He thought it was ridiculous that he had no one to depend on at a time like this except one of his authors. But if he didn't talk to Amano, he felt like his heart would shrivel up.

He was lonely, but telling Hodaka that would be selfish; he couldn't do it. He thought that if he was too selfish, Hodaka would wind up leaving him. And that scared Toya.



Lured by Amano's suggestion, Toya headed to the café an hour later and found the young man flipping placidly through a paperback. He was sitting by the windows, perhaps so it would be easier for Toya to find him, or else to enjoy the limited view offered by the cloudy sky.

A waiter started to show Toya to a table, but Toya interrupted him.

"I'm meeting someone."

Amano looked up then for the first time; apparently he'd heard Toya's voice.

"Mister Sakurai," he said, his face with its usual air of cheerfulness.

"Sorry I kept you waiting."

"No, it's fine. I managed to finish two of these short story collections."

After some discussion, the two went out to Ginza together because Toya didn't want to run into any editors he knew in Shinjuku or Ikebukuro. Since it wasn't even six o'clock, they were able to slip into a well-reviewed lounge that served home-style Japanese appetizers, even without a reservation. They ordered two mugs of beer and raised their glasses to each other.

"How have you been?" Amano asked, his voice sounding airy. But it was obvious that he was obliquely referring to Toya's relationship with Hodaka.

"It's picking up."

"'Picking up'? It's not a business!"

Things were going well, though. In fact, their relationship was more stable than it had ever been. They were attentive to each other and enjoyed their time together. Hodaka wasn't cruel to Toya, and even if he sometimes belittled him in bed, it was an obscene sort of shame that transformed into pleasure.

"Things are fine, thanks."

"Really? You still look sort of sad."

Amano picked up some of their Japanese-style food, happy to see the arrival of their stir-fried burdock, carrot, and sweet stewed meat with potatoes. He started in on it immediately.

"I love this kind of food. I hardly get a chance to eat it though, since I live alone," Amano said.

Although Amano mixed his concern for Toya with a good amount of levity, it was still genuine, and Toya was grateful for it. After Amano had spoken, though, there was an awkward silence. Amano must have been waiting for Toya to say something.

Toya steeled his resolve and opened his mouth.

"I'm just sad that I haven't been able to see him."

"Why don't you go see him, then?"

The completely nonchalant way Amano said that surprised Toya. It wasn't that easy. That's why he was so conflicted.

"We're both so busy, so we don't have time."

"But you're lovers. You should try harder to make time for each other."

Maybe Amano was right.

Toya drained his beer mug, but it was too soon to stop drinking, so he looked over the menu and considered moving on to Japanese saké.

"Don't drink too much, now," Amano said.

"I know," Toya laughed, and then ordered a bottle of crisp, chilled saké. Unlike his other authors, Toya found Amano relaxing and fun to spend time with. He wasn't overbearing; on the contrary, he was modest and kind. And even though Toya knew Amano was interested in him, he wanted to believe that if he just drew a line, they could still be friends.

Was that just an adult conceit? Or was he just that fond of Amano?

Toya had yet to have any professional problems with Amano. Amano was so sensible and friendly that he had never given Toya any trouble.

Toya pondered that as he drank, and though he was off to a fast start with the alcohol, once he started drinking, he couldn't bring himself to stop. Before he realized it, Toya had drained three cups of cold saké without having a single bite to eat.

He felt so sleepy.

"Mister Sakurai?"

Returning from the bathroom, Amano sounded surprised as he looked down at Toya, who was slumped over on the table.

"Yeah?"

"Are you all right?"

"Yeah. I'm fine…" Toya said, his words slurring together. His brain wobbled blurrily and his throat felt dry.

"You don't look fine to me," Amano said. He smiled uncomfortably and shook Toya's shoulder gently. He had started to snore.

"Mister Sakurai? Mister Sakurai!"

But no matter how much Amano yelled, it was too hard for Toya to sit back up.

Amano sighed. "Oh well. Where's your cell phone?"

"My pocket," Toya muttered.

"Got it."

That was just like Amano, to act so quickly. He took the cell phone out of Toya's breast pocket, flipped it open, and called someone.

Toya realized dreamily that this was the second time Amano had borrowed his cell phone. Amano was almost like a friend when they weren't working. If he weren't, Toya never would have let him borrow his phone.

*But things are still so awkward.*

Toya wanted to laugh at himself.

Amano lifted Toya up and helped him into a taxi; that was all Toya could do under his own power. Amano gave the driver directions, and the taxi sped off. Finally, Toya felt the taxi pull to a stop. He tried to open his eyes, but he was so sleepy he couldn't manage it. It felt so good to simply surrender his body to this drowsiness.

"Thanks."

Toya heard a voice from beyond the car's open door that sent a ripple through his foggy mind.

"No, thank you for doing this on such short notice," Amano said. "But if you neglect Mister Sakurai too much, I'll steal him away from you."

"I'm not sure I'm all right with that."

Toya lazily opened his eyes and saw Hodaka standing there.

Where were they?

"Toya."

He heard Hodaka's sweetly enchanting baritone. It was a voice one could never forget.

"Can you walk?"

"Nngh…"

Hodaka wrapped an arm around Toya's shoulders, helping him to stand. Toya looked up at him, his eyes glistening. It really was Hodaka standing there. Toya didn't feel shock so much as relief at that realization.

"Sir—"

"Apparently you drank too much."

Hodaka's voice was empty of any emotion. Finally, Toya realized that Amano had delivered him to Hodaka's apartment.

"I did not."

"Everyone says that when they're drunk," Hodaka chuckled. He lifted Toya out of the taxi, Toya's arm thrown over his shoulders. He took unhurried steps forward, matching Toya's pace.

It seemed an impossible distance to the elevator, a perception no doubt inspired by the alcohol that made his limbs feel so heavy. Luckily, Toya didn't feel nauseous, but he did have a splitting headache.

Hodaka lived on the fortieth floor of a high-rise apartment building near Hamarikyu. He had a custom-designed apartment which, to give a rough estimate, seemed even bigger than many freestanding houses. He lived alone, so he had a maid come in to take care of the place. He lived free of all burdens.

Using Hodaka's support, Toya just barely managed to make it to the guest bedroom on the second floor of Hodaka's apartment and flop onto the bed.

Hodaka sat down beside him and gently rested a hand on Toya's forehead. His cool fingers felt wonderful on Toya's burning skin. Toya suspected that the fever wasn't caused just from alcohol.

"Sir—"

Toya snuggled his head into Hodaka's lap and looked up at him with glistening eyes. His body felt like it was on fire and he wanted Hodaka to cool that flame.

"No, Toya," Hodaka whispered quietly, sensing Toya's intentions.

"Why not?"

"You're drunk. If you abuse your body any more than you already have, you're going to be sorry."

Hodaka pushed Toya gently off his lap and Toya turned his face away bitterly.

"You're so cruel, sir."

"Why do you say that?"

Toya had turned his back and couldn't see Hodaka's face. But he didn't want Hodaka to see his face, either. He was sure he looked completely disgraceful.

"You think I'll always do what you tell me, don't you, sir?"

Hodaka didn't say anything.

"I think about you constantly. But you never think of me," Toya said petulantly.

"I feel bad that we haven't been able to see each other lately," Hodaka said. "When we both get some free time, I'll make it up to you."

Make it up? Toya didn't want Hodaka to brush it all under the rug with such a clichéd promise.

"So that's how you see me?" Toya was shockingly assertive because of the alcohol.

"What do you mean?"

"You always think you can buy me off with your promises!"

It was a stupid complaint to make, but Toya always felt so lonely and their time together was always so short. He gripped the sheets tightly, but he couldn't let go of the pain in his heart.

"That's not true. I can make it up to you any way you want me to," Hodaka said.

"Then I want to see a play."

"A play?"

Toya cut him short, giving the name of a play he had missed seeing recently.

"Isn't it already sold out?"

The only theater group Toya followed was performing a play with a guest actor who had suddenly skyrocketed in popularity. But with that, plus the fact that the theater was so small, the tickets had sold out on the first day. The group had tried selling standing-room tickets ahead of time to avoid the chaos of selling tickets on the day of the performance, but Toya still hadn't been able to get any.

Toya had tried to get tickets over the phone, but he hadn't had a chance and had turned to Internet auctions with criminally high prices. He had asked a friend from college who was very big in theater about it, but the friend told Toya that even seats for those affiliated with the production weren't guaranteed. So Toya had simply choked back his tears and given up.

"If you get tickets, that will count as making it up to me."

Toya knew, even through the fog of alcohol, that it would be impossible. Hodaka didn't have many connections with the theater world, and his circle of friends was mostly limited to other authors. Besides, with Hodaka's principles, he wasn't the type of person to use his influence to get things done. He was a purist and hated using connections to get his way. Toya knew this all too well and wondered why he had made such a demand.

"All right," Hodaka said.

Toya was beginning to nod off when the man's answer reawakened him with frustration.

"Don't make promises you aren't going to keep!"

So Hodaka was arrogant, but there were kernels of decency in him, too. He just didn't know his limits. Once he made a promise, he would keep it. But enough—Toya didn't care about any of it anymore. He closed his eyes and felt himself being dragged into the abyss of slumber.

"You act like you've never broken a promise to me," Hodaka said.

Toya picked up on the frigidity in Hodaka's voice, which seemed to cut a cold swath to the heart of his mind.

"Sir…"

"I thought I told you not to have anything to do with Amano outside of work."

Hodaka's voice was so clear and frosty, it sent a chill down Toya's spine. His thoughts suddenly cleared, as if his brain had kicked into motion. It was terrifying, but when Toya timidly turned back around, his eyes met Hodaka's harsh face.

The fact that he had gotten so drunk at a business meeting was a social blunder. Because of that, Toya couldn't claim that the meeting had been for other reasons.

"How could you get drunk with that man? He could have taken you anywhere."

"Mister Amano would never—"

"Are you going to tell me he would never do that?" Hodaka's voice was chilly.

"He's not like you, Mister Hodaka," Toya shot back with a baseless attack brought on by annoyance.

"I see. Well, if you haven't learned your lesson yet, I'll teach you."

Hodaka seized both of Toya's arms and pushed him down. The alcohol helped restrain Toya's movements, so Hodaka didn't have any trouble.

"No—!"

"Behave yourself!" Hodaka muttered, pressing his lips to the nape of Toya's neck.

Toya gasped despite himself. His entire body tensed, but his fingers were left trembling. Hodaka looked down at him before sitting back up to sigh. He unfastened the buttons of Toya's shirt and then pulled the shirt off in silence before loosening Toya's belt.

Toya hated the thought of sleeping with Hodaka while he was so confused and angry, but there wasn't much he could do about it.

"S-sir—" A tense whisper escaped Toya as a fierce

chill assaulted his body. As Hodaka reached out to him, he flinched away instinctively.

"Don't look so scared," Hodaka said as he ruffled Toya's hair. "If that made you see reason, then you'll keep your promise to me."

"Yes sir…"

"Get changed and go to bed. You should wait until tomorrow to shower."

Despite the harshness of Hodaka's words, his fingers were tender as they combed through Toya's hair. Toya nodded reluctantly.

# *Chapter Three*

Toya felt terrible. He was completely hung over with the worst kind of headache, and he was afraid he would fall asleep at his desk. He had felt horrible all day, and there was no sign of improvement that afternoon. He wanted to leave early.

Hodaka had left mineral water next to Toya's bed that morning, so Toya had tried to drink as much as he could, but it didn't seem to be having much effect. He just had to remind himself that if he didn't drink water, his recovery would be even slower.

He remembered that he had started out drinking with Amano, but he had been shocked when he woke up at Hodaka's place. He had no idea how he'd wound up there. When he had left Hodaka's apartment, he'd hesitantly called Amano to ask him about it.

Amano quickly told Toya what had happened—that he'd lost control, and that Amano had called Hodaka. Hodaka's apartment was closer to Ginza than Toya's, Amano explained, and he knew that Hodaka could be trusted to look after Toya.

"I didn't know Mister Hodaka's number, so I used your phone."

When Amano told him that, Toya got jumpy. He could only remember snatches of what had happened the night before. Really, the only thing he remembered was being scolded by Hodaka for inviting Amano out to drink. He clearly remembered arguing with him about it, but everything else was a blur.

The more Toya thought about it, the more natural it seemed for Hodaka to be upset with him for getting together with Amano. Toya had been with a man who'd once confessed feelings for him, and Toya had gotten so drunk with that man that he didn't know what he was doing. It seemed only natural for Hodaka to criticize Toya.

But Amano wasn't the sort of person to take advantage of Toya just because he had the opportunity.

Just how angry was Hodaka, really?

Toya didn't even know that much, but that combined with his hangover made him feel absolutely terrible. He wasn't getting any better at work. He probably would be better off going home early.

"I feel horrible."

Toya brushed his hair aside with one hand and sighed again. Even he could recognize that his frustration was mounting. He ought to apologize to Hodaka. He felt uneasy not remembering the details of the night before, but it would be much better than worrying about it and not apologizing.

He loved Hodaka. And because he loved Hodaka so much, Toya wanted to be with him forever. He didn't want to lose that privilege—that right—for anything.

Toya picked up his cell phone and looked for somewhere isolated. He saw the emergency stairs and headed toward them. He wouldn't be totally safe there, but he could make a private call without worrying too

much about other people listening in.

Toya took a deep breath, and then selected Hodaka's number. The phone rang a few times before Hodaka picked up.

"Hello?"

"This is Sakurai, from Sozan Publishing."

"Uh-huh?"

There was a pause, but it was more than enough to send a wave through Toya's heart. Still, Toya guarded his calm and coolly apologized.

"I wanted to apologize for all the trouble I put you through last night."

"It wasn't any trouble."

"And I wanted to apologize again about the other matter…"

"Look, I'm sorry, but I'm a little busy right now. Could we continue this some other time?"

Hodaka seemed to be responding to Toya at least a little, but actually his words sounded very decisive. He spoke as arrogantly as ever, but that made Toya feel a mixture of resignation and annoyance, and he answered in a frail voice.

"All right," he said, though his anxiety clutched at him fiercely. The deeper he fell in love with Hodaka, the stronger it became. When had Toya become so feeble?

In the end, three days went by without word from Hodaka. After Toya returned home, he took a shower and then lay down on his bed in sweatpants. He turned the TV on absently.

"Ack!"

The screen was filled with a close-up of Hodaka.

Toya quickly checked the paper, but only saw "Major Live Appearance" describing that evening's formal news program. It made Toya's eyes widen though, incredulous that it could be Hodaka. It was so unusual for him to appear on television.

When Toya saw the actress who came on the screen next, he felt a pain deep in his heart. The actress nodding at Hodaka as he answered the anchorman's questions was Mari Tanaka.

"I've heard the reason you're here tonight is because Ms. Tanaka will be our hostess," the anchorman said.

Hodaka replied with a cool expression.

"That's right."

*No way…*

Hodaka was as beautiful as ever on the screen, and his deep, seductive voice seemed to enthrall Toya even more than usual. But it wasn't logic that drove Toya to it; it was deep distress.

Mari Tanaka was a beautiful, intellectual actress who had been rumored to be involved with Hodaka before. The fact that she was in charge of an interview segment on a formal news program that invited such intellectual guests was only further proof of her gifts of beauty and intelligence.

Toya had heard whispers that she still hadn't given up on Hodaka, so seeing the two of them together was more difficult than Toya could say. Even if it was a professional obligation, he hated it, and it made him feel awful.

Toya had gone out with Amano even after Hodaka told him not to, but now, Hodaka was doing the same thing.

Toya was depressed. Whenever he thought about Hodaka, he got all wound up.

Toya was going straight back to the office after a meeting, but he stopped in front of a bookstore and let out a long sigh. There were some women's magazines arranged at the front of the store, and their partially hidden titles put him into a bad mood. He knew that the magazines were writing about Hodaka and Mari Tanaka again. Though the painful rumors had reached Toya already, it still depressed him to see them in print.

An actor had been scheduled to make a live appearance on that news program to promote a Hollywood movie, but he'd fallen ill quite suddenly and had to cancel his trip to Japan. Since Hodaka had just received a literary award, he was the next choice.

Hodaka usually didn't appear on television, so since he'd accepted the invitation, the rumors were flying. Because of that, the sales of *Emergence*, which had begun to flag, boomed again. There were some benefits to the appearance, but it only made Toya more confused.

What he hated most of all was that he was getting so upset by the rumors. But he knew that even though he was depressed, he had a mountain of work, and he couldn't let his personal problems interfere with that. Somehow, he had to get his emotions under control.

He didn't want to distrust Hodaka, but Toya had been in the wrong, and that worried him. Hodaka may have broken his promise to get together with Toya, but Toya had gone out with Amano without telling Hodaka, and he knew that would make Hodaka angry. Plus, he seemed to remember needling Hodaka about something afterwards. It made sense that Hodaka was fed up with him. That was why Toya felt so uneasy.

Toya muttered under his breath in frustration as he walked to the train station to head back to the office.

Was it possible if they were both so busy?

It was so hard to ignore his lover's feelings. But since he had fallen for someone who kept his emotions hidden, all Toya could do was surrender to his emotions. In a situation like that, Toya had to be careful or their love wouldn't go on.

Going around in circles like that, Toya eventually started to confuse himself. He just kept getting more and more depressed, without end.

Suddenly his cell phone rang and Toya looked down at the screen in surprise. It was Hodaka. He came to a quick stop, and then went down a side street where the noise of the cars wouldn't interfere with the call.

"Hello?"

"It's me," Hodaka said, his voice as carelessly arrogant as ever. "Are you free two nights from now?"

"Yes…"

"Then let's get together. Six o'clock in Shibuya."

Hodaka's voice was so reluctant that Toya's forehead creased. Shibuya was packed with people and Hodaka didn't like it, so Toya couldn't understand why he wanted to meet there.

"Why do you want to go there, sir?"

"I'm going to make things up to you, like you wanted me to."

"What?"

Toya had some vague memory of asking Hodaka something like that, but he couldn't remember the details. He thought he'd only berated Hodaka for suddenly breaking their date, but now he remembered there had been more. But if he asked for details, Hodaka would probably get annoyed.

"Um…"

"That was all I wanted to say," Hodaka said before hanging up.

Toya had no intention of calling him back to ask what he'd meant, and he simply stared at the screen of his cell phone, filled with an unease that was impossible to describe.

Of course, none of his questions were answered.

*If only the smallest catch of Hodaka's breath had remained.*

As he ruminated, aching melancholy filled Toya's heart.

# *Chapter Four*

Hodaka had told Toya to wait for him outside the entrance of one of Shibuya's big department stores, and Toya wondered if he'd made Hodaka promise to buy him something.

Wine, clothes, cheese, maybe tea. Toya listed things off in his mind, but he just didn't know. It frustrated him that he couldn't remember and that made him edgy.

"Oh!"

As Toya walked toward the place where they were supposed to meet, he saw a banner hanging on the wall of the store. Cold shivered down his spine as he finally remembered: he had whined for Hodaka to take him to the play's opening night—tonight. Even though he had known it was impossible for anyone to get tickets.

*Oh no.*

Toya put a hand to his mouth. He was so disconcerted that he was afraid the noise he'd made might well up past his throat. The reason Hodaka had told him to wait there was because he had gotten tickets.

How selfish Hodaka must have thought he was. Wasn't he tired of Toya yet? And how had he gotten hold of these tickets?

But Toya's thoughts were cut off as Hodaka climbed out of a taxi, exactly on time, and his lips curled into a smile when he saw Toya.

"Have you been waiting long?"

"No."

It was evening, and the street was predictably crowded with people, but Hodaka stood out more than Toya had expected. Embarrassed by that fact, Toya gazed at his lover.

"It was a lot harder than I thought to get the tickets," Hodaka said. "I'm glad you're on time."

Heat flooded up through Toya's body, but all he could do was bite down on his lip. He choked back his desire to confess that he had asked too much of Hodaka. He was too embarrassed to admit it. He was embarrassed of how childishly he had acted.

"Sorry, but I could only get the standing room tickets," Hodaka said.

"That's more than enough," Toya said in a hoarse voice.

He'd heard that there weren't any same-day tickets, and that even the standing room tickets sold out immediately. It was a miracle that Hodaka had gotten any at all.

"But how did you—?"

"I happen to know someone involved with the play."

With those words, Hodaka held out the tickets to Toya. Toya looked at them in shock. They had Mari Tanaka's name on them. Toya knew the names of the star and the playwright, but he hadn't paid attention to anyone else.

*So that's what he was doing…*

In a flash of understanding, Toya saw why Hodaka had gone on television. He had been networking.

Toya felt terrible about forcing Hodaka to exploit a power he usually never took advantage of. It had ended up causing baseless rumors, which must have given Hodaka some trouble. Hodaka usually lived his life without relying on anyone else. Toya thought he liked that attitude, but he had forced Hodaka to ignore his values.

"We should hurry," Hodaka said, and Toya nodded quickly. His voice felt like it was stuck in his throat and he couldn't answer.

The play was even better than the advance reviews promised, so that even after the curtain had dropped, the audience was still applauding.

Toya thought he would have been tired after standing for three hours, even though there was a break in the middle, but they were lucky enough to get a good spot by the handrail. Besides, he had been so absorbed in the story that he had barely noticed.

Other people around them quickly realized that Kai Hodaka was standing with them, and stared throughout the show, but there was no way to avoid it.

Hodaka never budged from Toya's side, his eyes fixed on the stage, even though he probably didn't have any interest in the play. Toya had never heard Hodaka talk about theater, and he had never invited Toya out to a play before. But there was no denying that Hodaka had opened up some precious time in his schedule to give Toya what he wanted.

It was sincere and unspoken kindness. It was times like this that Toya could feel that Hodaka loved him, even though at times, his love was clumsy and suffocating.

Toya felt as if the end of the play had pierced his heart: there was something moving about it. The flutter in his emotions suddenly became a raging torrent. He couldn't stop it and tears spilled from his pale-colored eyes.

*Thank you* or *I'm sorry.*

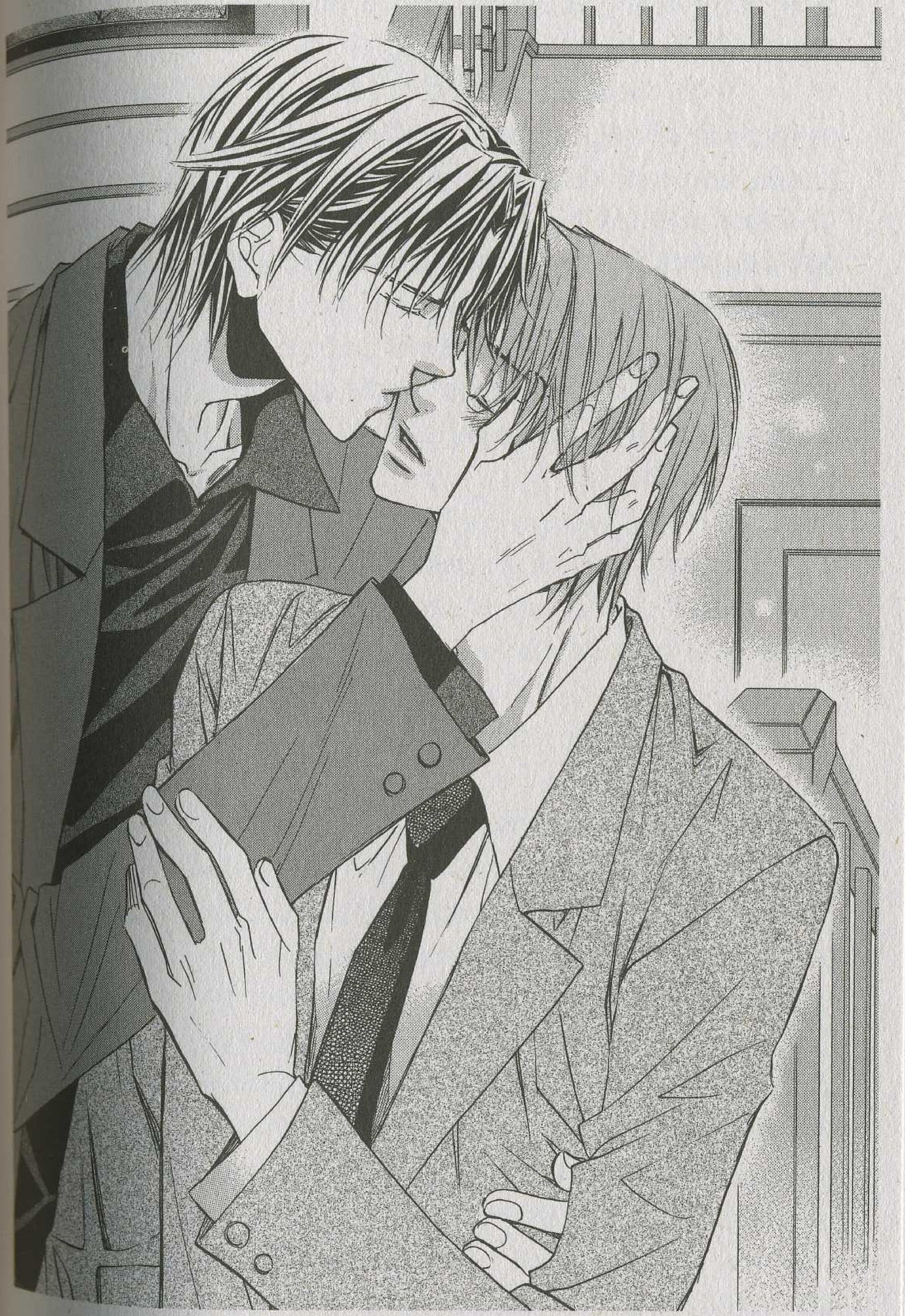
The words he wanted to say ran through his mind, and then disappeared.

Hodaka glanced at Toya and saw that he was crying. He said nothing as he brought his lips to Toya's cheek and kissed away those tears, so all Toya could do was reign them in. Someone might have been watching them. But right then, the joy Toya felt when Hodaka's soft, cool lips touched him left him feeling warm and happy.

*I love you. So much. Forever.*

Toya couldn't get the words out of his mouth, and that frustrated him. He couldn't hold himself back and he suddenly grabbed Hodaka's arm. He pulled Hodaka away, holding onto the man's arm so that he could walk in silence.

Toya heard applause bubble up from the audience at another curtain call. But he had something more



important to do. He couldn't stop the impulsive adoration that filled his heart.

Toya stopped in the middle of the stairs and continued crying silently. Hodaka looked at him with a smile, and then touched his lips to Toya's cheek again. Hodaka pressed his lips to Toya's skin over and over, his kissed like promises to wipe away all the tears Toya would ever cry.

## *Bonus*

As Hodaka typed at a mechanical pace on his keyboard, he suddenly looked up to see that it was six o'clock. He had started to get hungry, but he wanted to get a little more work done before eating. He took a sip of the coffee the maid had brewed for him and let out a short sigh.

Perhaps because of how intensely he had been concentrating on writing, there was the slightest trace of fatigue in his handsome face. If the novel kept progressing at the same pace, he would be able to finish it by the deadline.

Breaking a promise went against Hodaka's principles.

Still, he decided to take a short break and clicked the save button on his word processor. As Hodaka turned his eyes casually from the computer screen, they fell on the copies of *Emergence* piled on his desk. The day before at his television appearance, several members of the show's staff had asked him for autographs.

Hodaka didn't understand autographs. He didn't think there was any value to the relics people left behind. But he knew there were people who would be happy to have something like that, so if someone asked him for an autograph, he never refused.

*Emergence* was a special novel for Hodaka. He had worked without becoming too invested in any of his novels before, but *Emergence* had been his first job with Toya Sakurai, so it was different.

He knew just how much work Toya had put into everything, from the cover design, to the plot outline on the back, to the reviews on the jacket. He had even mulled over the paper to use and given Hodaka several samples to get an idea of which one he preferred.

Hodaka was really satisfied with how the book finally turned out, though he didn't particularly care about what other people thought of it. He considered that reasonable.

He reached out and touched the cover of the book. Just that touch sent his thoughts flying instantly to his distant lover. He might be calling soon. He had apparently finished up proofreading yesterday, so he would be going home early that day.

Hodaka shook the daydream from his mind and moved his computer aside to make room for signing autographs. He used his fountain pen for most things, including autographs and writing letters. It had a certain way of writing that made it most satisfying. Hodaka took the pen from the desk drawer and tested it a few times on a piece of paper, but frowned.

The letters he wrote on the paper were faint.

He pulled open the desk drawer, certain that he had stocked up on ink cartridges, but he didn't see any. He remembered then that he had been busy and forgotten to buy them. It was a rare oversight for a person as conscientious as Hodaka.

The fountain pen he used came from abroad, so he couldn't find cartridges at most stationery stores—though he could probably get to a specialty store in Ginza before it closed. He didn't need to autograph the books and send them out immediately, but he didn't like to procrastinate.

But Toya might call while he was out, and what if he wanted to go out tonight? Hodaka didn't want to miss the call.

*I can get the cartridges tomorrow.*

Hodaka decided to get a little further in his writing. But the instant he made that decision, the phone on his table rang. Hearing the familiar melody, a smile came over Hodaka's lips.

# The Forsaken

## Chapter One

Toya Sakurai had offered to meet Hodaka at the nearest station, but his lover had responded, "That's all right. I'll take a cab."

They were harsh words for someone in the middle of his honeymoon, and since Toya wasn't covering up for his embarrassment, they seemed even more meager. But since his lover was Kai Hodaka, Toya couldn't afford to lack the confidence to hear him out no matter what he said.

Toya checked to make sure the champagne was cold enough and tasted the dressing. Feeling restless and fidgety, Toya opened and closed the refrigerator door again and again. The glasses were perfectly polished and Toya had used every skill he possessed for the hors d'oeuvres.

All that was left was to wait for Hodaka to arrive, but that was exactly why it was impossible to relax. He should have made Hodaka agree to meet him at the station. While Hodaka drawing stares with his magnificent good looks was a concern, Toya really just wanted Hodaka to learn the way from the subway to his apartment.

How Toya felt on his way to work, what sights greeted him: no doubt the desire for Hodaka to know these details was a display of Toya's feelings. But just as Toya wanted to know the things that Hodaka saw, he couldn't give up his desire for Hodaka to know about him. Even though he knew it was a selfish desire.

Just then, the intercom buzzed and Toya's head shot up. He returned the champagne glasses to the table and hurried to open the door. Hodaka stood outside.

"Hey."

His arms were filled with a bouquet of scarlet roses, and Toya had to fight the urge to laugh at the completely overdone image. It was like something out of an old television show or movie.

"Where did you get those?"

"I went to a florist and told them I wanted something for a housewarming gift, and they recommended roses."

From the almost glum way he said this, Toya knew that Hodaka was embarrassed.

"They must have thought you were going to see your girlfriend."

"Were they wrong?"

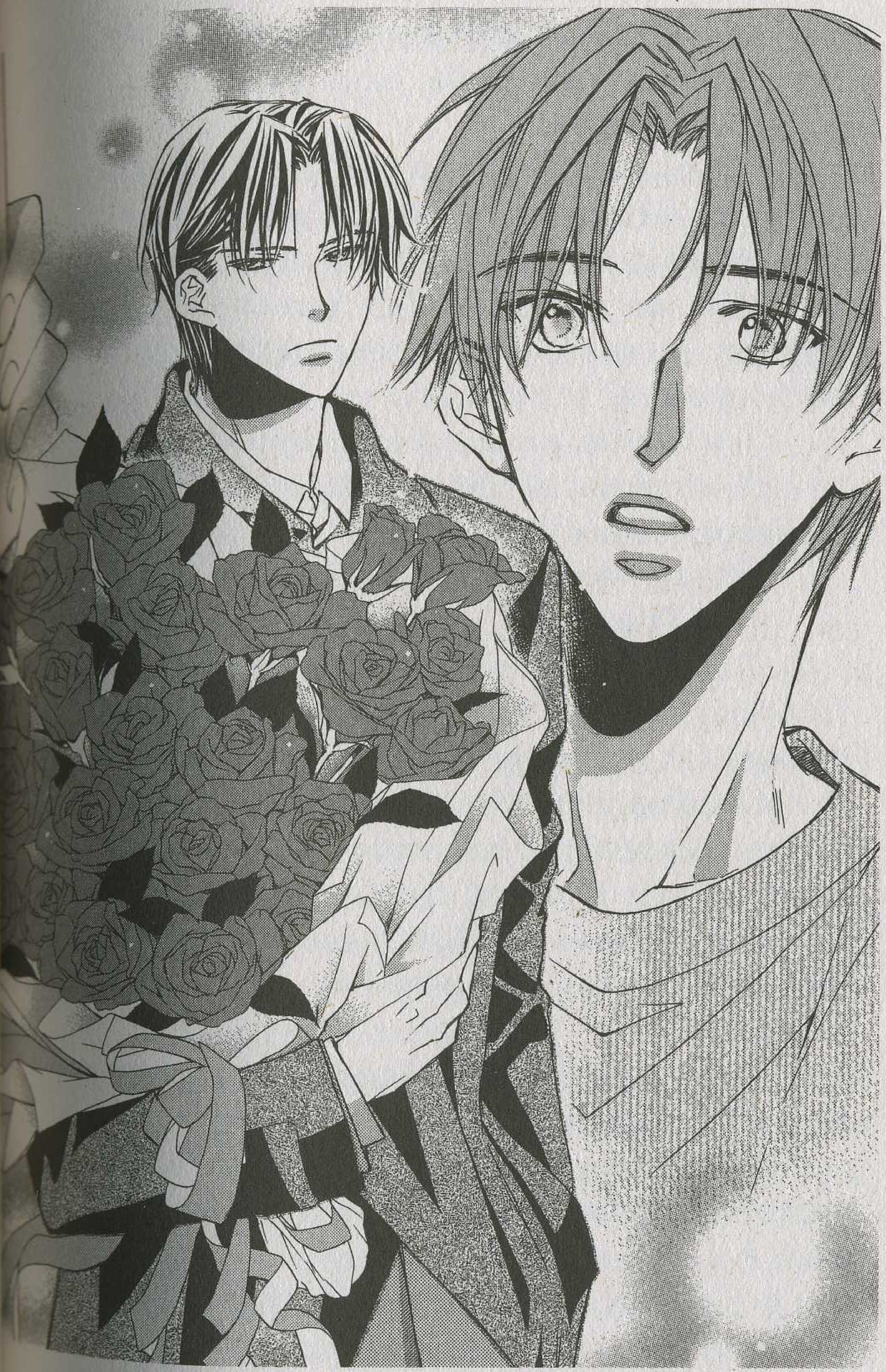
"You know what I mean. It's only natural that they thought a man like you would have a lover who matched roses this amazing."

Toya was embarrassed at the petulance he heard in his own voice. But Hodaka didn't seem to notice and just said, "You're my lover."

"I—I know."

"Anyway, aren't you going to invite me in? Or are you going to charge me admission before you let me through your door?"

Toya suddenly remembered that they were



standing in the small hallway inside his door. He shook his head.

"No, come in."

He gave Hodaka a pair of slippers and led him to the kitchen. The door to the kitchen was right next to the front door, and a strange look came over Hodaka's face.

"I'm sorry it's so small," Toya said. "It's just an efficiency, so we have to go through the kitchen to get to the living room."

Toya smiled grimly at Hodaka's curious reaction.

"I'm close to downtown, so rent is really expensive," Toya added.

"That's why I said you should live with me."

"I can't do that."

Toya worked in the pulp division of Sozan Publishing, an important company in the field, and Hodaka was one of the authors he managed. Hodaka, an outstanding, best-selling author of mysteries, had a difficult personality—and some even whispered that he was morally bankrupt. Because of that, the amazing pace of publication that Hodaka had kept up during the two years that Toya had edited for him was a kind of miracle.

"How cold," Hodaka murmured, wrapping his arms around Toya from behind.

"Oh—" Toya jumped in surprise and hit his hand on the door of the refrigerator, crying out quietly in pain.

"I'm sorry," Hodaka said with a little smile as he picked up Toya's left hand and kissed it.

Hodaka may have meant for it to distract Toya

from the pain, but however gentle the kiss, it sent a sweet ache down Toya's spine, which only had the opposite effect.

"Um—it's not important. There's more to see."

Conscious of the blush in his cheeks, Toya led Hodaka into his room. The room was slightly larger than usual, so even though the apartment was an efficiency, it was a little roomier. Toya had hung a curtain to hide the bed area and the dinner table doubled as a desk.

"Are you surprised at how small it is?"

"It's more than I expected. I thought it would be a hole in the wall. It's bigger than the last place you lived, isn't it?"

"Yes, a little bit."

Toya hadn't expected Hodaka to call it a hole in the wall, and he chuckled.

"I only come home to sleep anyway, so this is all I need. But it's a little humble to invite guests to."

"I want you to think of my apartment as your second home."

"My second home is much nicer than my first, then."

"But this is your stronghold."

Hodaka sounded a little whiny after all. Toya had made the decision to move and had ruthlessly rejected the chance to live with Hodaka. It was the one thing he couldn't do. He wanted Hodaka to always be equal. Even if they were in different positions as author and editor, Toya didn't like to speculate on which of them was higher, and which was lower.

"I'm always with you in my heart, sir."

"That platitude isn't like you."

Hodaka tried to kiss Toya as he said this, but he stopped just short of it. Toya realized that Hodaka wasn't looking at his face; he was looking in an entirely different direction. Toya turned his eyes in the same direction curiously.

Hodaka's eyes rested on a small bookshelf that doubled as a knickknack display.

"Is something wrong, sir?"

"You don't have *Emergence* or *Incubation.*"

Hodaka was rather upset. Those were the two books that Hodaka had worked on with Toya. They were both deeply meaningful for Toya.

"What? Oh! I do so have them."

Toya laughed. Had he ever imagined two years ago that Hodaka would display this petulance so openly?

"You've got everything else of mine."

"They're over here," Toya said, pulling back the curtain that hid a corner of the room. His bed sat in this slapdash recess to create a modest sleeping area. There was another bookshelf at the head of the bed, where *Emergence* and *Incubation* sat.

"I told you, I only come here to sleep. I spend most of my time here in bed. If I keep them here, I can always reach out and touch your stories."

"You say such adorable things," Hodaka said, sweeping Toya up in his arms. He quickly closed the gap between their lips. The words were so fragile that Toya wondered if he had heard them at all.

"Mmf—"

Toya felt the warm sensation of Hodaka's tongue

slipping into his mouth. It tangled nimbly with Toya's tongue and enticed him into a deeper kiss.

Toya remembered the champagne he had chilled, but being kissed so passionately made him stop caring completely. The liquid that poured over Toya's tongue brought a much sweeter intoxication than the champagne.

Hodaka ran his tongue fiercely over the sensitive line of Toya's teeth, and Toya's shoulders trembled. Sensing that, Hodaka slid his hands down from Toya's back to his hips, holding him up.

"Ah—mm—"

Hodaka sucked so hard and suddenly on Toya's tongue that he felt like it would be torn out of his mouth. Their kiss was so deep that the root of his tongue ached, and a lazy heat filled his lower body. Toya took a few hesitant steps back. Noticing that, Hodaka pushed him back onto the small bed, making the humble wooden frame give a pitiful shriek as they fell on top of it.

Toya was glad that he'd changed the sheets that morning. It hadn't been because he'd expected something like this to happen. He just didn't want Hodaka to see how he lived.

Hodaka pushed Toya's sweater up, urging him to take it off. Toya complied, half in a daze. The rest of his clothes were pulled off as well, leaving him completely naked.

"Nngh—"

"You're as sensitive as ever."

The last time they'd had intercourse was only three days ago. Toya remembered drinking a little more wine than usual to celebrate the completion of Hodaka's latest novel, and then tumbling into bed with his lover.

Hodaka bit down gently on Toya's nipple, making him jump. As he squirmed, his left hand struck the wall with a bang. It was louder than he'd expected—Toya's eyes shot open at the sudden noise, but Hodaka didn't seem to care.

"If you struggle too much, your neighbors will hear. Have you found out how loud you can be yet?"

"Of course not!"

Toya had met one of his neighbors the other day, a young professional woman about his age. And now he remembered hearing her television sometimes. The walls might be thinner than he thought.

That meant she might hear them…

Toya was yanked back to reality by the sudden realization that someone might have seen Hodaka come in. Of course, there was no reason for him to hide the fact that they were lovers, or to be ashamed of it. But feeling guilty had somehow become second nature to him. He felt like such an idiot.

"You don't have to be afraid," Hodaka whispered placidly, wrapping his arms around Toya. His shirt felt strangely good against Toya's skin.

"I told you, you're my lover, Toya. You don't need to be ashamed or scared of anyone."

"Sir…" Toya's voice trembled with happiness.

Hodaka would never deny the days they had spent together in love. He would even heatedly argue how important they were.

"If you aren't afraid of being seen or embarrassed, you'll be fine," Hodaka said.

Toya nodded primly. He raised his body slightly, begging for a kiss from the man who bent over him. In between light, pecking kisses, Hodaka's fingers teased over Toya's nipples and belly. All Toya could do was gasp.

"Ah—nngh!"

His body seemed strangely sensitive, as if he was tense for some reason. Even though Hodaka was only caressing him with featherlight touches, his entire body was covered in a fine sheen of sweat.

"Ah!"

Hodaka took hold of Toya's crotch through the cloth and Toya let out a quick gasp.

"You're so eager today. Just moving around here, I can tell how wet you are."

Toya didn't need Hodaka to tell him that. He could feel the excitement welling out of him. Because of that, just having the man press down on his body through the cloth was enough to make Toya's member swell and moisten.

A sharp ache ran through the core of his body. He began to fidget. He felt his body being parted by Hodaka and he twitched obscenely, yearning for Hodaka to slip inside. Toya wanted Hodaka to fill the flirtatious cleft in his body, to completely satisfy him. He wanted the heat of the man's body to warm him inside and out.

"Sir…please—" Toya's voice was lewdly hoarse.

"You want me inside already?"

A hint of surprise colored Hodaka's voice, sending an intoxicating thrill through Toya's heart. Hodaka was the one who had made Toya so depraved. Toya wanted him to take responsibility for that and do everything he could to drive him wild.

Hodaka ordered Toya to get onto all fours, and then kneeled behind him. He put his hands on Toya's butt cheeks and pulled them firmly apart. Something warm and wet touched him and Toya cried out in surprise. He hadn't been expecting Hodaka to lick him. Toya had gotten lube ready before Hodaka had come over, but he was too embarrassed to delay things by getting it out.

"If I don't warm you up, you'll get hurt."

"But, nngh—stop…your tongue—"

"You haven't loosened up at all yet."

"It's…it's…nngh!!"

Hodaka's tongue, wet with saliva, stroked all around Toya's entrance, diving into his body like a living thing. Toya's flesh exploded with sensation at each tiny movement of Hodaka's wet, wriggling tongue. Hodaka seemed to realize that there was a limit to how much he could do with his tongue and pulled his face away. Instead, he buried his finger inside the same spot, now moist with his saliva.

"Nngh—"

"You're so tight today, so tense."

"Nn—nngh. Mmf!"

There was still only one finger inside. *I have to keep my voice down,* Toya thought in a corner of his mind. But when he did, his body tensed and he couldn't loosen up anymore.

"Don't suck me in like that. The main attraction is yet to come."

"This is…your f—ah!"

"You think this is my fault? I didn't mean to do this. Your body is just so much more obscene than other people's. It devours my fingers and whatever else I offer it. I only teased you a little bit, and now look at how wet you are. Is that my fault?"

Hodaka's deep, sensual voice combined with his stimulation of Toya's skin to enflame Toya's desire.

"Anngh!"

"You're staining the sheets."

Embarrassed by Hodaka's cold observation, all Toya could do was blush. It only added to the heat that flushed Toya's wet erection. The lazy heat that grew out of his lower body filled him completely, from his head all the way to his toes. But still, compared to the pleasure he felt when Hodaka penetrated him, it was nothing.

At times feverish, at times languid, Hodaka worked his fingers, now up to two, inside Toya's slick body. Toya's control was melting away and he moved his hips, wanting some more decisive stimulation.

"You like it here?"

"Ah! No…"

Hodaka stimulated the most sensitive part of Toya, right at the entrance, and Toya's body gave way.

"It sure looks like you do. You're hard, too."

Hodaka circled one hand around to the front of Toya's body and pinched his left nipple. Toya panted brokenly.

"S-sir…"

"What is it?"

Toya's body was so excited that he wanted

Hodaka to do whatever he liked, but Hodaka just teased him. Toya felt like he might climax from just the feeling of Hodaka's fingers deep inside, but the man driving it all toyed with Toya without a drop of sweat on his face. Toya didn't even have to look to know that.

But Toya believed that Hodaka's detachment was one of his most beautiful features. Enthralled, the man's two fingers moved noisily into Toya's opening body. Toya wanted something thicker to penetrate him and he twisted his hips up, inviting Hodaka in.

"Please…" Toya pleaded hoarsely.

Amused, Hodaka asked, "Please what?"

"I want your…"

Toya wanted to be conquered by Hodaka's hot, firm shaft. Fortunately, his vulgar, unvoiced words seemed to satisfy Hodaka and he pulled his fingers out. Then he pressed his manhood against the dirty cleft in Toya's hot flesh.

"Is this what you want?"

"Yes—"

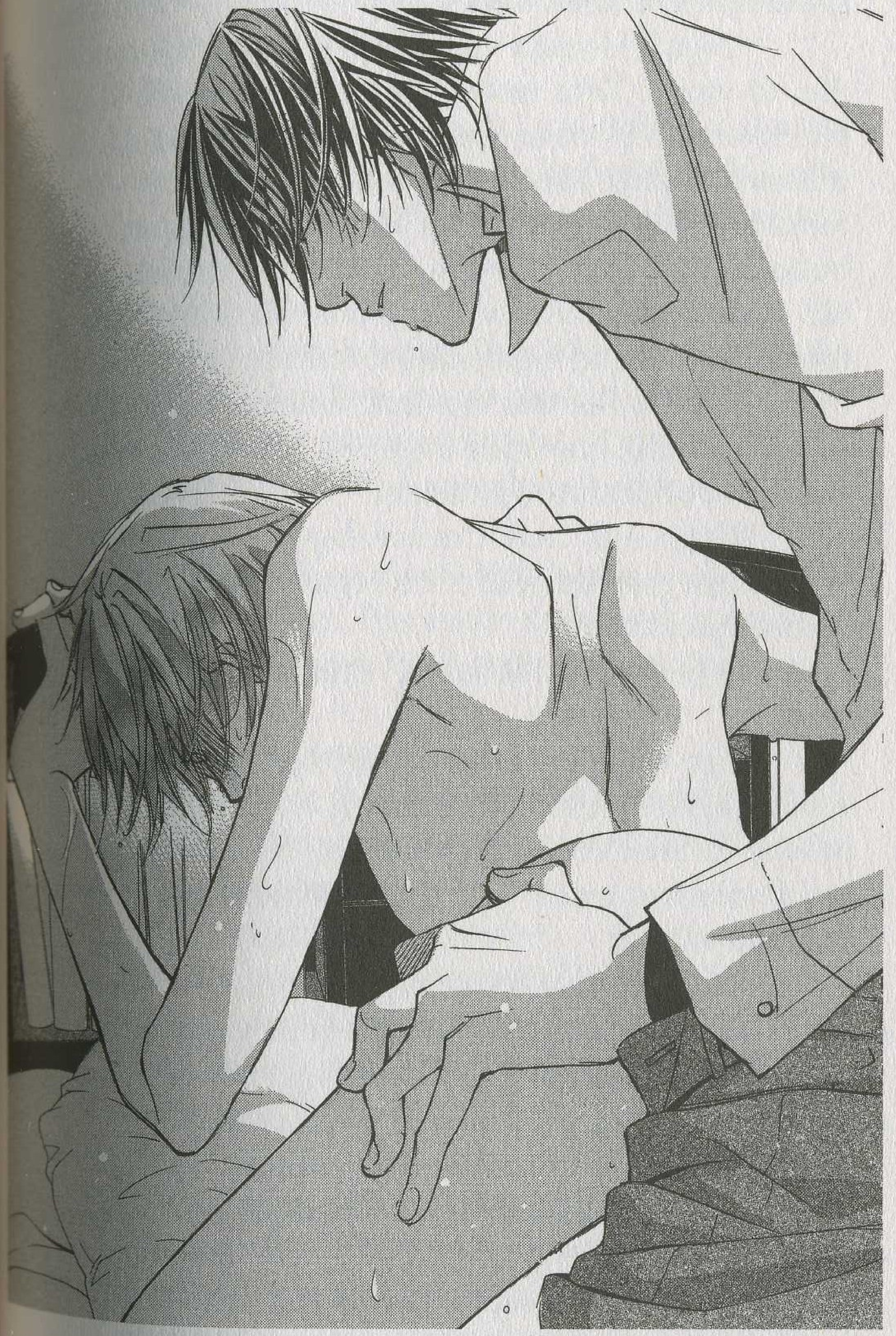
Hodaka pushed his hips forward slightly and his penis touched Toya, but then pulled away. Toya's flesh twitched desolately. He wanted it so badly, he thought it would drive him insane.

"Don't be mean…"

"Good boy."

"Ahh!"

Hodaka thrust deep inside Toya from an unexpected angle and the sensation penetrated to the marrow of his bones. Pleasure invaded Toya's entire body and he finally faced his first explosion. Thick, milky fluid shot over the



sheets and splattered Toya's chin.

"Toya," Hodaka whispered to Toya, trying to get him to move. Toya rested his hands on the headboard for leverage. Hodaka was still fully clothed and had unfastened only one or two buttons, so every time he thrust his hips, the cloth of his pants rubbed against Toya's buttocks. Hodaka's movements were so passionate that the bed creaked loudly, its sound blending with the moans Toya found impossible to hold back.

Doing it like that in a dark, cramped room created a tension unlike any other time, and Toya tumbled into a whirlpool of depraved pleasure.

"Ungh—no…no! I'm coming—"

Toya grabbed hold of his organ, trying to delay his second ejaculation.

"Don't worry about it. Come as often as you want."

Toya struggled to withstand the urge, but Hodaka rubbed against his flesh, enticing him, as he reached around to flick the sensitive tip of Toya's organ. This lewd technique made Toya's voice tremble and he shook his head wildly.

"I-I'll get your books dirty!"

Having sex right beside the headboard threatened to sully Hodaka's novels. Even if Toya was drowning in lust, he didn't want to lose that much control.

"Yeah," Hodaka whispered, circling an arm around Toya's waist. He pulled Toya back and sat on the bed.

"Angh!"

Toya's own weight pushed Hodaka all the way inside him, and he fell back against Hodaka's chest, trembling. Hodaka held Toya from behind and sweetly inquired, "Do you like this?"

"Yes…"

Did Hodaka mean *does it feel good?* Or did he mean *can you take any more?*Toya was losing himself in the sensation so much that the distinction was becoming hazy.

"Stop! It's so—so good…"

"Touch yourself."

Hodaka laid his hand on Toya's and guided it down to his groin, so that Toya began stroking himself. Toya suddenly tightened around Hodaka, wringing a quiet grunt from the man. That sound, rich with sensuality, hounded Toya.

He stroked himself with both hands, making them sticky with ejaculate. His entire body was covered in sweat and the air was filled with an indecent, sultry smell.

"Nngh—ah! Anngh!"

Hodaka's big, thick member slid between Toya's sensitive walls. Bouncing his hips up and down, Toya's fingers moved unconsciously.

"No—I'm going to scream—"

"Do you want me to stop you?"

Hodaka used his fingers to wipe up the ejaculate that had spattered onto Toya's stomach, and then he shoved them into Toya's mouth.

"Nngff! Mm!"

"I'm going to hold off on kissing you."

Wrapping his tongue wetly around the fingers that had crafted such exquisite worlds, Toya chased after the supreme pleasure Hodaka brought him.

"Don't you think you should take a shower?" Hodaka asked.

"Mm…"

Toya felt like he would fall asleep, but he summoned all of his strength and stood up. When he did, the proof of their lovemaking trailed down his legs. His face flushed, but he didn't think Hodaka had seen. Still, he tottered to the bathroom on unsteady feet.

Listening to the sound of the shower, Hodaka took on a thoughtful pose, his chin propped in his right hand. He should have asked Toya where he kept the spare sheets before forcing him to go to the bathroom.

He opened the closet but didn't see any sheets. After some thought, Hodaka looked under the bed and found some drawers with fresh sheets inside. He changed the bed, quickly but clumsily, and balled up the dirtied sheets. He looked around for the washing machine, and then realized it must have been in the bathroom.

There was so much he didn't know how to do.

Hodaka had lived in a gigantic mansion until high school. When his parents died, he'd received a huge inheritance and the estate, but he'd decided to give up the house that took so much looking after. After that, he'd refused all offers to stay with relatives and had moved to a condominium in the city. His current apartment near Hamarikyu was the most comfortable yet.

Hodaka's eyes swept over the room, once more observing Toya's new apartment.

Toya had said that he only came back to sleep, but still, such a small apartment must have been stifling.

Just then the bathroom door opened, and Toya

reappeared. His cheeks were flushed and his moist eyes were blank, as if echoes of pleasure still thrummed through his body. Or maybe it was a result of a hot shower.

"Are you all right?" Hodaka asked.

"Yes. I'm sorry, I—"

"You should lie down if you're hurt."

"Maybe I will," Toya murmured, then burrowed into the bed. "Feel free to have something to drink if you want to, sir. I chilled some champagne and white wine. There's beer, too…"

"I'll get a beer, then."

Hodaka opened the fridge and took out a can of beer. He took out the salad Toya had prepared as well, and poured the beer into a glass on the table.

"I'm sorry," Toya whispered hoarsely.

"Why are you apologizing?"

Toya's pale, unblinking eyes always gazed so passionately that they sometimes made Hodaka feel he was being seduced. When he was with Toya, Hodaka forgot all about his self-control.

"I'm not being a very good host."

Hodaka had been swept away just like Toya had, so there was no reason for Toya to apologize. Hodaka's lips twisted into an unconscious smile. He knew such things happened, but until he'd met Toya, he'd never experienced them himself.

"Don't be stupid."

He'd thought Toya would refuse to have sex in the thin-walled apartment, but Toya had endured it admirably and accepted Hodaka's advances. That made

Hodaka happier than anything.

"Can I have some of these, too?" Hodaka asked as he picked up a canapé with a smile, and Toya blushed.

"Yes."

"It's really good."

So much time had passed that water had condensed on the canapés, but when Hodaka thought about the fact that Toya had made them for him, they tasted absolutely delicious.

Hodaka saw Toya smile as he lay in bed and asked, "Do you want something to drink?"

"No, not right now."

Just then Hodaka noticed the bouquet of roses that lay on the table and stood up. There weren't any vases to hold them, so he moved them into a pot full of water and put them back on the table.

He heard Toya burst out laughing.

"What?"

"You should have bought a vase," Toya said, but obviously, Hodaka hadn't thought that far ahead.

"I should have bought one with the flowers. I was only thinking about bringing them to you."

"A man doesn't need to keep a vase in his apartment."

Toya's voice was filled with sleepiness as he spoke and Hodaka drew up beside him. When he sat down, the twin-sized bed creaked.

"You should sleep," Hodaka said.

Reassured, Toya slipped into a gentle slumber. He needed his rest, so they would talk tomorrow instead. Hodaka was the one who'd worn him out so badly, but it

was the best way to express their feelings. Just looking at Toya filled Hodaka's heart with warmth. He had never imagined he would experience anything like it.

Hodaka reached out to touch Toya, but worried that he might wake Toya, he pulled his hand back immediately. He wanted to watch Toya sleep a little while longer.

# Chapter Two

"So, what are you thinking of putting in the fan book?"

Toya looked up when the conversation turned to him at the editorial meeting. That summer, *Chrysalis,* Hodaka's new novel, would go on sale to complete the trilogy he had begun with *Emergence.*

When Toya had told his boss, Makihara, about Hodaka's plan to make *Emergence* into a trilogy, Makihara had suddenly become motivated. He'd suggested that they make a fan book for the trilogy's completion.

Toya had mentioned the idea to Hodaka, and was surprised at the man's positive answer. But since Hodaka had said he might change his mind depending on the content they suggested, Toya had to create the most polished proposal he could. It might have been easier to ask Hodaka what he wanted, but Toya wanted to surprise him.

He'd spoken to Hodaka earlier about his plans for the fan book, to see what the man thought before bringing it to the meeting.

"I'd like to make the main section a long interview with you, discussing all the details of your plots from your debut novel up until now," Toya had read calmly from his proposal.

"That's reasonable. What else?" Hodaka had asked.

"We were thinking about getting an analysis on all of your books. Since you've already written some essays for PR, we can republish those to be read alongside current ones. We're also looking for any of your unpublished short stories. Besides that, we'd like to have reviews from famous people in various fields and, if possible, short two- or three-person conferences with you and other authors."

"It's a good start, but it doesn't seem very original."

Toya had been startled when Hodaka put his finger bluntly on the point he was most apprehensive about. Toya had hit a mental block on the project. He had done research on fan books for other authors from many different publishers, but they all seemed average. Some had polls where fans had voted for their favorite books or characters, but that approach seemed inappropriate for Hodaka's novels.

If at all possible, Toya wanted to make something fans could treasure for their whole lives, something that would offer long-term enjoyment. But all his ideas were average and conservative when he wanted to make something adventurous and different.

The first step was to get Hodaka's approval on every detail of the proposal, so Toya had to avoid bringing him completely outrageous ideas. That was the heart of Toya's dilemma.

Later, at the meeting, Toya still hadn't solved his problem.

"If we can't create something unique, why put together such a glossy book like this?" Makihara asked.

"We're making a whole book about Kai Hodaka, so how about a glimpse of his personal life?" Yoshikawa spoke up, and Toya couldn't help but agree.

The only person at work who knew about Toya's relationship with Hodaka was Makihara, but Toya felt his ears flushing. He knew it was dangerous to react so openly at work, but he couldn't help it.

"Does anyone have any thoughts?" Toya asked.

"Does he have any unusual hobbies, or will he talk about his lifestyle? There are a bunch of things we could do," Makihara said.

"Those are great ideas. Nowadays many authors have their own websites, but not Mister Hodaka. It feels like he's wrapped up in a veil of secrecy, so if we put together something like that, people would snap it up."

Yoshikawa's glibness was true to form.

"That's true…" Toya said evasively.

"There are a lot of people who like Mister Hodaka just on a visual level, so why not put in a few dirty pictures? Things they can't publish in regular magazines."

"Dirty pictures? What do you mean, Mister Yoshikawa?" one of the other editors asked, sounding confused.

"Like, if we can get him to take some clothes off."

"He'll never agree to that," Toya replied, but

Yoshikawa went on lightheartedly.

"Maybe. We can't ask him right away, but if we waited until the photographer was taking pictures and suggested it on the spot, he might surprise us."

"Don't say such shameless things!"

Of course Toya knew Yoshikawa was joking to lighten the mood, but if someone took the idea seriously, Toya would be in trouble. Hodaka wasn't the sort of person who would get swept away in the moment, so even if they did the photos, suggesting it to him would just make him angry.

*But what if Hodaka thought it sounded interesting?*

Toya wasn't sure about it. It was hard for him to follow Hodaka's thought processes because they were so completely different from his own. He didn't know what Hodaka might find appealing. But he could never tell his coworkers that the reason he wanted to put that idea to the side was because Hodaka might agree to it. Toya didn't want to intrude on Hodaka's privacy. He didn't want to display it to strangers. That might have been due to the strong feeling of possessiveness deep in Toya's heart.

"I was just joking, of course," Yoshikawa said, looking completely astonished by Toya's forcefulness.

"No, I'm sorry. But if I make suggestions like that to him, it'll only make my job harder. And if the book turns out too different from our proposal, Mister Hodaka might cancel the project, so I don't want to try tricking him, either. As far as our company is concerned, Kai Hodaka means novels."

"You've got a point," Makihara intervened. "If there's any friction, you're the one who's going to bear the brunt of it. We should just drop the more lurid ideas. Mister Hodaka is definitely good-looking, but that's not what makes him a great novelist. And he might get upset if we suggest that."

Special issues of literary magazines had been written about him before, but the fan book would be the first of its kind devoted completely to Kai Hodaka. Though there had been queries about fan books before, Hodaka had never given the go-ahead. Finally, though, he was giving serious consideration to Sozan Publishing's proposal, so it seemed inevitable that people would think he was giving them special treatment.

Toya was grateful for that special treatment, but he worried that he was making unreasonable demands on Hodaka's incomparable genius. Hodaka had always kept business and pleasure strictly separated. But with enough opportunities, he was bound to make an error in judgment. He couldn't keep his personal feelings from affecting his actions every time.

"Oh, Sakurai, have you thought of any candidates for the roundtables in the fan book?"

It seemed like they were going to be discussing the book for a while yet. Toya's stomach started to hurt. He'd almost rather they asked him about the new novel.

"I haven't discussed it with Mister Hodaka yet, but I was thinking of having people from a variety of age ranges."

"Well then, how about Amano?"

The name came smoothly to Makihara's lips.

"You want Mister Amano...?" Toya's face clouded at the mention of Yo Amano, a young author he managed. But Makihara didn't notice the momentary change.

Amano was a young author Toya had discovered, a young man still in his mid-twenties. He was a handsome, friendly person who possessed a level of knowledge equal to any scholar. He specialized in stories full of profound legend and he was slowly gaining popularity.

"I don't know if they have any overlap in their fan bases, but it might turn some attention to Amano's books, too. It'd be great to have the comparison between a new author and an experienced one from the same label. And isn't Amano a big fan of Hodaka?" Makihara asked.

"Yes…" Toya said, being evasive again.

"What's wrong? You don't like the idea?"

"No, it's not that. I just want a balanced outline, so I'm going to talk to a ghostwriter." Toya quickly gave the name of an agency to bolster his excuse and crisply ended the conversation.

So they wanted to do an interview with Amano.

If they were going to have an interview with the younger generation, Toya thought it should be an author. He knew an actor or artist wouldn't be a fitting foil for Hodaka, so since he wanted it to be an author, it would be good to attract people to Sozan Publishing. There was no one better than Amano.

However, Toya had dumped Amano not once, but twice. Plus, Amano knew that Hodaka had been the reason for it both times. How could he be callous enough to ask Amano to have a discussion with Hodaka, his former rival? It wouldn't just leave Amano with hard feelings, but Hodaka, too.

The meeting ended after a few inconsequential remarks. Toya gathered up his papers and went back to some interrupted work, but then suddenly decided against it. Instead, he got his cell phone out from the drawer he'd put it in and headed to the emergency exit. People hardly ever used those stairs, so there was no one near them. Except for the fact that his voice echoed a bit, Toya felt at ease. He hit the redial button on his phone and soon heard Hodaka's voice.

"Hello?"

"It's me, sir."

"Oh, hello. Is something wrong?"

"Actually, I need to talk to you about the book we're planning. Do you have a few minutes?"

Toya spoke politely, so Hodaka's tone became slightly more formal as he discerned that the conversation was for work.

"I'm not at home right now, but if you can make it short, go ahead."

Toya hesitated and then, telling himself that it would be over soon, he spoke.

"As you saw in the tentative plan I showed you, we'd like for you to meet with famous people from various fields. Some of the people we've been considering are…"

Toya listed the names of artists, movie directors, and authors, one after another until finally he said the name "Yo Amano," with more than a hint of tension in his voice.

"I see. That certainly is quite a variety," Hodaka said, sounding amused. "Any of those people are fine with me."

"Is there anybody you particularly want to meet?"

"I make my own opportunities for that."

Hodaka's words were firm, and full of confidence. Of all the people Toya knew, Hodaka was surely the only one who could say something like that so nonchalantly.

"I see. Then if we decide to include Mister Amano, there won't be a problem?"

"Not at all."

When Toya heard Hodaka's utterly aloof, unconcerned response, he felt ridiculous and wondered if he worrying over nothing.

"Then I'll contact you when I have more details."

"Sure."

Toya didn't mind the curt way Hodaka ended the call since the next challenge would be Amano. Even if Hodaka didn't seem to have a grudge against Amano, Amano himself might not be so magnanimous.

It may have been inevitable, but it was Toya's fault for becoming romantically involved with someone from work. *If only I had known things would be this complicated,* Toya thought with a sigh.

"Is something wrong, sir?"

The editor he'd been meeting with looked at

Hodaka uneasily as he came back from taking Toya's call. He gave her a reassuring smile.

He was used to the stares he got whenever he entered a café. As long as Hodaka could look at the face of the person he loved most, he didn't care what anyone else looked like. So he found the thoughts of other people very mysterious.

"Sorry. I had to take care of that."

"I'm sorry to keep you when you're so busy. Thank you for coming to see me today," the woman said as she bowed her head politely.

"I had to go out anyway, and this was on my way."

"I heard you're gathering material for your next book?"

She seemed to be teasing, but her eyes were filled with naked curiosity.

"Yes. *Chrysalis* is almost finished, so now I'm looking for material to finish another book," he said as he sipped his coffee. "But how is Missus Arimoto doing?"

"Missus Arimoto is still very busy. There are no openings in her calendar. She's offered to send her protégée, Ms. Murata, in her place."

"That should be fine."

"You have an interest in cooking, don't you, Mister Hodaka? Are you going to make a cookbook next?"

"It's a secret."

A meaningful smile came over Hodaka's lips, making the woman flush. She seemed sorry when she said she had another meeting. Hodaka stood up, too. He wanted to get home soon, and the maid was probably wondering what he wanted for dinner.

When Hodaka stepped outside, he took out his phone. He suddenly remembered Toya's reaction earlier. They had spoken over the phone, so Hodaka didn't know exactly what sort of face Toya had made, but it hadn't been very difficult to detect the hesitation and reluctance in his voice.

Hodaka wasn't very good at seeing the changes in his own emotions, but he was extremely observant of changes in others. If he weren't, it would be much harder to write novels.

Something must have happened to unnerve Toya. Something to do with the fan book he'd been putting so much work into lately.

Hodaka had heard proposals for a fan book from every other company. But if they were going to make an official book about him, it would take a lot of time and effort supervising to make it something he could approve of. But since Hodaka wanted to focus his energy on creativity, he had refused every last request. It would have been different if there was someone to supervise it for him, but at the time, there wasn't anyone he trusted that much.

But with Toya involved in the book's production, Hodaka thought the book would turn out close to his ideal. Hodaka had accepted Sozan Publishing's request with that expectation in mind.

Hodaka was always impressed by Toya's abilities as an editor—without playing favorites. Because Toya had been a fan of Hodaka's, he'd read all of his books and worked hard to form his own understanding of them. He was good at his work, and if he was putting the book together, Hodaka could count on it being something worthwhile.

Hodaka didn't think doing an interview with Yo Amano would be a problem. He had read a few of Amano's books, and the combination of attractive prose and a sensibility that was almost jarring because of his youth built up Hodaka's expectations of a budding new genius. Amano might not be universally accepted, but sooner or later he would produce a stunning masterpiece. He wasn't a luminary in his field, but Hodaka was not bothered by the idea of talking to him.

The fact that Toya had discovered the talent of Amano spoke to Toya's amazing skill as an editor. But Toya didn't think much of his own abilities. He thought that an editor was the invisible stagehand who merely smoothed the path for the author's storytelling to become a book.

Wasn't Hodaka's treatment of Toya excessive compared to his abilities? Hodaka knew that Toya thought so. But the reason Toya was special was simply because he tried to understand Hodaka's emotions.

Hodaka had shown an interest in Toya and tried to evaluate his humanity, but Toya had openly confronted him. When Toya tried to deal with Hodaka purely professionally, he'd argued when Hodaka tried to cross that line. Hodaka had been eager to make Toya something more than just an editor.

The people who dealt with Hodaka as an author tended to ignore the fundamental parts of his character.

No, "ignore" wasn't quite the right word. They wrote off his eccentric, difficult personality as just part of being Kai Hodaka. Most people didn't bother to understand him. That had been the most effective solution for Hodaka and the people who had to work with him. It was easiest to only deal with people professionally whenever possible. That was why Hodaka didn't mind if everything was done through phone calls and e-mail.

According to his mystery author friends, Hodaka was an unmatchable author. He never missed a deadline and everything he wrote sold well. So even if he had some odd traits, he was still an impeccable person to work with.

But still, there were many editors who couldn't deal with Hodaka's unusual behavior, and there had been a lot of turnover. Hodaka didn't mind that, though. Because of it, he'd met Toya, and Toya was different. Hodaka knew that if Toya ever left him, in either his professional or his personal life, he would fall apart.

Toya was the only thing he had ever been obsessed with. Toya had taught Hodaka what loneliness was—the emptiness that sprang up and refused to be ignored as soon as the heat of Toya's body grew distant was called "loneliness." Toya could never guess how great Hodaka's shock was when he learned the truth about that word.

In any case, Hodaka felt he should ask Toya what had made him so nervous. Did Toya have a problem because Amano had asked him out? The thought came to Hodaka in a flash, but he decided it would be strange if Toya was worried about that.

Toya had told him that he'd flatly refused Amano. Since then, Amano had apparently not tried to meddle with them. In which case, it was immature to avoid him forever.

Hodaka's relationship with Amano had been reset and left neutral. Because that was how Hodaka felt, the real reason for Toya's reluctance was inscrutable.

*Damn it…*

Rubbing his eyes, puffy with lack of sleep, Toya gazed at himself in the mirror of his bathroom. There were distinct circles under his eyes and he found himself suddenly thinking that he wasn't so young anymore.

It had been so hectic that he hadn't been able to call Hodaka, and, for one reason or another, Toya had decided to put off contacting Amano. He said he didn't want to hurt anyone, but he knew he was just being a coward.

*How could a full-grown adult say something so naïve?* he thought, self-pityingly.

He would call Amano. Telling himself there was no time like the present, Toya went into the living room and picked up his cell phone. Drops of water were still falling from his hair but Toya selected Amano's number from his directory, oblivious to them.

It was almost noon, so Amano would be awake.

"Hello?"

"Hello, this is Sakurai from Sozan Publishing."

"It's so strange to hear from you at this hour."

"I'm sorry, but I have a special favor to ask of you."

Toya could hear the man on the other end of the line sitting up a little straighter at the sincerity in Toya's voice.

"Sure, what can I do for you? I actually have a deadline next week and I have a third of the book left to do."

"Oh—"

Toya knew his reaction was rude, but he was struck speechless. Amano was one of the fastest authors Toya managed and he rarely missed a deadline. He was usually the type who liked to turn his manuscripts in long before the deadline and then revise them very carefully. For that reason Toya trusted Amano to be self-disciplined, but something must have interfered with his writing.

As if Amano had sensed Toya's thought, he let out a dispirited, "I'm sorry. I was doing some research and found a contradiction in the story's setting. When I fixed that, I had to rebuild the entire plot. I wasn't sure it was even possible to fix it."

So that was it. In that case, Toya was even more reluctant to ask Amano for this favor.

"I see. I'm sorry for bothering you when you're so busy. I'll ask again later."

"No way! I won't be able to stop thinking about it. Please just tell me now."

Toya hesitated for a long moment over Amano's concern. But there were some people who couldn't write when they were preoccupied with something, so Toya told him.

"We're planning to publish a fan book for Mister Hodaka this summer. We'd like to include roundtable

discussions with him and people from a variety of backgrounds, and we were wondering if we could get you to be one of them."

"What?! Me?" Amano's voice became immediately excited. "An interview with Kai Hodaka…?"

Amano sounded as if he were speaking to himself, and Toya felt uneasy. Maybe he had been wrong to ask Amano after all.

"I'm sorry. There's so much between you that… Well, it must be difficult," Toya offered gloomily, but Amano came back with an utterly unexpected response.

"No, not at all. I really want to do it. I'd be thrilled!" Amano's response was so unexpected, Toya couldn't believe his ears.

"R-really?"

"Yes! You must have worried about it a lot, but I have a lot of respect for Kai Hodaka as an author. Besides, I'm a fan of his and there are a ton of things I want to ask him. I've never talked to him in a business setting, so we've never had a real conversation," Amano said in a much more excited mood than Toya had expected.

"Well, uh, in that case I'll put you on the list."

"Put me at the very top so I can actually do it. I think it would inspire me to write better, too."

"I'm glad to hear you say that. It makes the planning much more rewarding."

Toya thanked Amano politely and said goodbye, hung up, and then let out a deep sigh. He hadn't expected Amano to accept that easily and his reaction had caught Toya completely off-guard. Maybe the two of them

weren't feuding like he'd imagined.

Maybe Toya had just overanalyzed the situation. If so, he felt embarrassed. He was mortified that he had been so vain as to think people had such strong feelings for him. But now he wasn't sure how to think about it.

Even if he could write Hodaka off as having a thought process unlike a normal person's, there was the possibility that Amano was hiding his true feelings. Pushing Amano into the fan book project might just plant the seed of deep emotional suffering in him. When Toya considered that, he couldn't help but feel uneasy. But maybe he was just unable to draw boundaries and he was being foolish.

# Chapter Three

"Hey Sakurai," someone called out from behind, and Toya looked up, lost in thought.

"Yoshikawa."

It seemed his coworker Yoshikawa had just gotten back to the office. He held a plastic umbrella in his hand and gave a carefree laugh. "It's really coming down out there!"

There were umbrellas at the office in case it suddenly started raining, but Toya still didn't like rainy days. He had to go to Hodaka's later that day, but it seemed like a terribly depressing prospect.

"What's wrong? You look really down," Yoshikawa said.

"It's this fan book. I don't know what else to put in the outline."

The deadline was closing in fast, so Toya had to wrap up the proposal.

"We're trying to delve into Mister Hodaka's private life, but I don't think he's going to let us do that easily. It's really tough."

"Yeah, everyone acts like it's easy," Yoshikawa said, even though he acted like it was easy, too—while washing his hands of the problem completely.

If Hodaka were the sort of person who let people into his private territory, Toya wouldn't be agonizing about it so much. But he wasn't, so it was a big problem.

Compared to two years ago, Toya knew much better how to deal with Hodaka, but Hodaka's feelings were still hard to judge and Toya often obsessed about them.

*I'll just leave it at that for today.*

Toya turned off his computer and cleaned up his desk. After making sure that he hadn't overlooked any mail or faxes, he got ready to go home.

*Chrysalis* was progressing quickly and Toya wanted to wrap up Hodaka's fan book, too. He felt a little guilty that he might be playing favorites with Hodaka since he wanted to work with him as impartially as he did all his other authors. But Hodaka was way ahead of the pack in sales numbers, and Toya noticed that he was often completely wrapped up in working with him.

If he had time after leaving work, it was typical for Toya to go straight to Hodaka's apartment. But did that mean he was confusing his professional and personal lives? Toya was confident he could draw a line between business and pleasure, so that meant Amano and Hodaka could observe that line and enforce it more comfortably than even Toya could. No doubt that was the reason they had both given such ready consent to do the interview.

While Toya agonized and thought his way to a dead end, the interview moved steadily closer. That decisiveness might have been natural to the two men, but Toya was jealous of it at times.

Toya reached Hodaka's apartment more than thirty minutes later. He'd planned to take a taxi from the station, but they were much busier than he expected because of the rain and he gave up on it. As a result, he was soaked through when he got to Hodaka's apartment. When Hodaka met him at the door, he was shocked to see how wet Toya was.

"You didn't take a car?" he asked.

"There was a huge line. It must be because of the rain, and because it's Friday night."

Hodaka nodded in understanding. After searching for a place to put his wet umbrella, Toya stood beside the door.

"You should have told me. I would have taken my car."

"If I let you spoil me that much, I'd really be in for it."

"What does that mean? Who would stop you?"

Hodaka's lips shaped themselves into a smile and he wrapped an arm around Toya's waist, drawing him closer. Toya was still carrying his briefcase, which ended up pressed against Hodaka's chest.

"God would."

"You're an atheist," Hodaka whispered as he sucked lightly on Toya's lips. The kiss was full with affectionate passion and it tickled Toya's mouth.

Toya started to call him "sir" like always, but just before the word left his mouth, he said "Kai," instead.

"What is it?"

Toya sensed something warm in Hodaka's voice. That was enough to free him of his anxiety, his fear, and all the negative emotions in his heart. What Hodaka gave him was so huge. It made Toya worry that he had nothing to give in return.

"I just wanted to see how it sounded."

Toya still wasn't used to using Hodaka's first name, so it sounded forced when he said it. Just saying it aloud made him feel hopelessly embarrassed.

"Do you have any plans tonight?" Hodaka asked.

"I haven't thought of anything."

But they never did anything special. Usually, they just went to see each other.

"Do you want to see a movie, then?" Hodaka murmured, tugging gently on Toya's earlobe with his teeth.

"You mean, go out?"

It was a Friday, so there would be late shows for the movies, but Toya felt a little listless at the idea of going out in the rain.

"If we can do this in the theater, then we can go out. Otherwise, can't we just watch a DVD?" Toya asked.

"I think you know which one I'll choose."

They could never tease each other like this in public, almost sexually harassing each other.

"But is it wrong to ask when I already know the answer?" Hodaka asked, though his teasing words were tender. Toya released his grip on the briefcase pinned between their bodies and wrapped his arms around the man's neck.

"I like it better like this," Toya said.

"This reminds me of gym class. Let's play a game to see who drops the briefcase first," Hodaka said as he kissed Toya again.

"That sounds more like a party game to me."

Hodaka always enjoyed meaningless bets and mischief, even though there would be no way to be sure which of them had dropped the briefcase.

Without a word, Hodaka tightened his grip on Toya's chin and gently opened his mouth. He traced lightly over Toya's gums, but didn't go any deeper. Toya thought he was prepared, but sweat covered his brow in his eagerness and it was difficult to stand under the wild beating of his heart and excitement. Saliva welled out of his open mouth and dripped from his chin. When he opened his eyes slightly, Hodaka's shockingly beautiful face filled his vision.

Hodaka circled the tip of his tongue two or three times over the roof of Toya's mouth, and that sensation made something deep inside Toya ache. His upper body twitched in surprise at the sound of his briefcase hitting the floor, which brought him back to his senses.

"You lost," Hodaka whispered, licking Toya's earlobe.

"Not fair."

Hodaka's long, slender fingers trailed from Toya's chin over his cheek, feeling the shape of his face.

"Now, the penalty. Why don't you do the thing that you find the most humiliating?"

As Hodaka said that, he took a step back on the smooth floor just inside the door, pulling Toya forward slightly. Toya fell to his knees. Still wearing his shoes, Toya brushed against Hodaka's clothes as if bewitched. He rested his palm lightly on the man's groin, and even through the clothes, Toya could feel Hodaka's member pulsing.

Toya felt his mouth go suddenly dry, leaving his tongue gummy so it wouldn't move. He knew he should stop, since it was so obscene to suck Hodaka there in the hallway, before he'd even taken his shoes off. He wasn't that desperate.

But if rationality could actually put a brake on Toya's behavior, he never would have fallen so far.

Hodaka wanted to make Toya do vulgar things. He liked watching Toya hesitate, and equivocate, and get embarrassed. And that ritual was the best thing in the world to intoxicate Toya.

With a shaking hand, Toya pulled down Hodaka's zipper and reached inside. He touched the organ he found and kissed it. A long time ago, he wouldn't have even imagined doing such a thing.

Toya pulled Hodaka's penis free and, since it still showed no signs of reacting, kissed the tip of it gently. He pressed his lips to it again and again, from the tip to the base, feeling like he could offer this man his loyalty for the rest of time.

"Nngh—mm."

Toya dragged his tongue from the head to the root. He drew lines of saliva with his darting tongue, making the organ glisten. In order to spread the wetness, Toya tilted his head at a different angle and brought the man's penis before his eyes, then covered it in fluid. Trailing his tongue down the back, Toya bobbed his head up and down until he heard Hodaka gasp.

Toya couldn't bear this perversion.

He took the precious tip into his mouth, drawing his cheeks taut to stimulate the narrowest part of it. He didn't forget to use his hand, too, caressing along the length.

"Nngh—" Hodaka moaned.

Toya wanted to make him feel even more, so he opened his mouth slightly, cradling Hodaka's penis with his lips and tongue. He tickled the hole at the tip and felt the distinctive taste of Hodaka's fluids on his tongue.

A hot twinge shot through Toya's belly at the thought, and he pulled his knees together desperately. Trying to distract himself from his own pleasure, he pulled away from Hodaka's groin, trailing a line of saliva.

"Sir…is that good?"

"Yeah. It's great," Hodaka answered hoarsely, his voice lustrous. He rested his left hand on Toya's head. There was no force in it, but Toya's head felt heavier, as if a crown had been placed on it.

"Nngh—mmf. S-sir—"

Swallowing his saliva, Toya lost himself in his work, taking Hodaka further into his mouth. He rubbed his tongue over the penis, covering it in fluid, pushing it in and out of his mouth, moving his head back and forth over it. Opening his mouth wide, it reached the back of his throat and tears filled his eyes. But it wasn't painful. There was no longer any denying the intoxication it caused Toya. Why did it feel so good to devote himself entirely to this man?

Toya felt his nipples grow painfully tense, hardened by his excitement as they rubbed against his shirt. He wanted it soon. He wanted Hodaka to come. He wanted the proof of his lover's lust to spill into his mouth.

"Nngh—mmf…mm."

Toya couldn't even tell if he was sucking Hodaka's penis or licking it anymore. His fingers fumbled tenderly with Hodaka's balls, and his face was covered in the sticky mixture of his saliva and Hodaka's excitement.

"You've gotten good at this," Hodaka said, his voice rougher than usual, sensually stimulating Toya's ears.

"Ah—anngh—mm…"

Toya lapped up the saliva that threatened to overflow from his mouth with Hodaka's excitement, drinking it down deliriously. But still Toya couldn't even think of pulling away from the huge thing that had grown in his mouth. He continued lavishing his attention on Hodaka's manhood.

"If you suck me off that eagerly, you're going to make me come."

"Come…" Toya said as he looked up at Hodaka eagerly. "Come, sir."

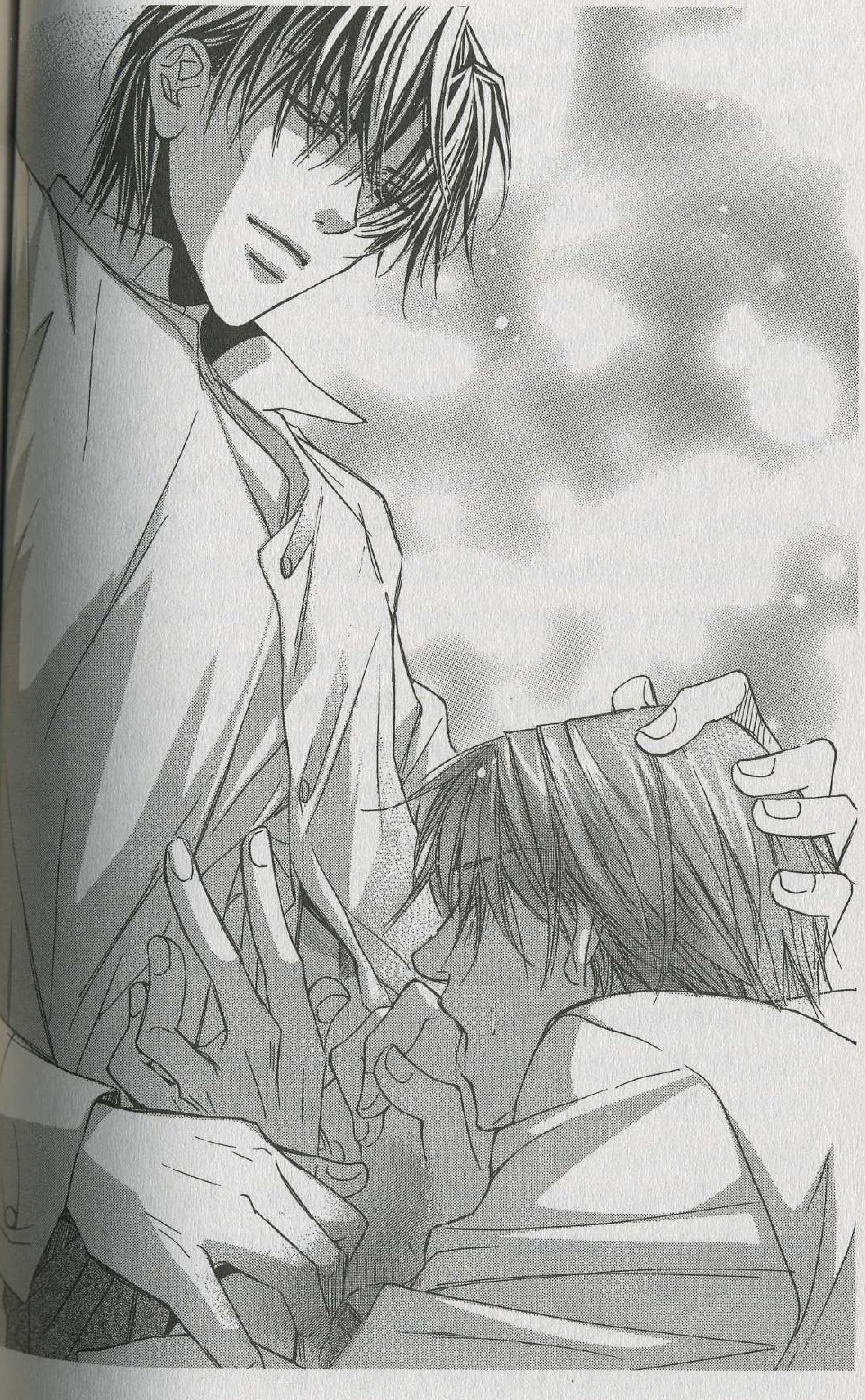
Toya felt a thrill of fear at begging Hodaka to finish for him. But he wanted to feel that he was connected to Hodaka, body and soul, so he would take the man's emission whenever he asked. That desire would never disappear.

"Next, I'm going to punish you if you call me 'sir' again."

"Nngh—"

Toya took Hodaka's penis into the side of his mouth, fondling Hodaka's testicles at the same time, when he turned his head and got a shock.

He saw himself reflected in a mirror hanging in the



entrance hall. His eyes were filled with lascivious tears, and sweat and spit covered his mouth, his chin, and his hands. He could also see that his own reaction was so obvious that he could see it even through his clothing. Did Hodaka see this taint of indecency, too?

When Toya touched Hodaka, he made a loud lapping noise, and he felt like he might burst at any moment just from his own noises. Shocked by his depraved imagination, Toya shuddered. Sweat trailed down his forehead and fell to the floor.

"I'll let you choose. Where do you want it?" Hodaka asked. His voice was luscious, but Hodaka acted completely detached and that stirred up Toya's lust even more.

"Anywhere…you can do it anywhere."

"If you admit that I own you, then I'll shoot it wherever you want," Hodaka whispered with uncanny sweetness, resting a hand lightly on Toya's head.

Toya wanted it inside. He wanted Hodaka's thick shaft to invade his trembling walls, so desperate to be filled. He wanted Hodaka to drive him insane, until he forgot everything else in the world.

"Nngh—!"

Hodaka's hot ejaculate struck the inside of Toya's cheek, and he drank it down before slowly pulling his head away.

He wiped the trailing fluid from the corner of his mouth, licked it off his hand, and then ran his tongue over the man's penis to clean him off. Wanting to lick every trace of seed from Hodaka, Toya puckered his lips and sucked at the tiny hole in the tip.

"Good boy. Tell me what you want as your reward."

"I get a reward for losing the game?"

"You've been so good, you deserve it," Hodaka murmured.

By the time they got to the bedroom, it was obvious how excited Toya was.

"Kai—"

Toya's hazel eyes, filled with lust, called out unceasingly to Hodaka. Was he anxious about something, or maybe worried? The book they were planning must have been the cause of it, but since Toya wouldn't reveal his concerns, Hodaka wasn't going to ask him about them. Intruding too far seemed to be against the rules.

Hodaka was bad at giving to others. Since he had everything he could ever want, he couldn't really comprehend what other people might need. That was why he wanted to let Toya escape in the easiest way possible. If Toya's concerns disappeared when they joined their bodies in pleasure, that was all Hodaka could ask for.

Blushing, Toya hid his face behind his arms. Although he had stared at his disturbingly lewd acts in the hallway mirror, he didn't want Hodaka to see him in such disarray. Hodaka just found such a contradictory mindset more arousing and interesting.

"When you get excited, your nipples always get so hard," Hodaka said, musing on how fascinating the human body was.

"You're terrible," Toya said with a raspy cry.

"But it's the truth."

Sitting on top of Toya, Hodaka pinched Toya's nipple between his thumb and forefinger. Toya looked up at him, his back arching as tension filled his body; the taut line of his throat looked like a work of art.

"You get so excited when I play with your nipples. You shouldn't be ashamed."

"How can you—"

Hodaka spoke detachedly as he rubbed the shy nipples that proclaimed their existence from the center of Toya's rose-colored areolas, and then licked down Toya's throat to his collarbone.

"Ah—angh!"

Toya's voice became unbelievably luscious almost at once. His skin was covered in a sheen of sweat. Hodaka twirled those pert nipples under his fingertips and felt Toya's member against his stomach. He realized that he still hadn't let Toya come yet, but he couldn't stop tormenting his lover's nipples.

"Sir, I—I'm—"

"What?"

"I'm going to…get your clothes…dirty…"

"Are you excited?" Hodaka asked nonchalantly, running his hand over Toya's member through his slacks. As soon as he touched the wet organ, he was left with a peculiarly vivid sensation. "Looks like you already came without telling me."

"I—I didn't!"

"You protest too much. How could you be this wet just from anticipation?"

Hodaka moved his hand loosely and Toya writhed as if in pain. Each time he moved his body, the sheets gathered like waves in the sea.

"Let me see, then," Hodaka said with a smirk as he pulled off Toya's belt. He grabbed Toya's pants and underwear, and then made him lift his hips to pull them both off at once.

With only his shirt remaining, there was nothing left to cover Toya. His turgid member was already slick with fluid and trembled as if it might experience its second climax at any moment. Toya pulled his knees together to hide it, so Hodaka quietly ordered, "Open your legs."

"What?"

"Hold your ankles. If I can't see you, I can't take you, can I?"

"But—!"

Though they were lovers, Toya still resisted revealing his most shameful state to Hodaka. Despite the fact that Toya's body devoured Hodaka so joyously, whether with his mouth or between his legs, he still felt ashamed. But that only made Hodaka even more tender toward him.

"Let me see."

"But…"

There was a sweet hesitation in Toya's almost coquettish voice.

"Don't you want me to make it good for you?" Hodaka asked.

"I do..." Toya said, his admission like a sigh.

"Then I will. Open your legs."

After a few moments' hesitation, Toya took hold of his ankles in either hand. He held onto them firmly and spread his legs, exposing his erection. The fluid had soaked his pubic hair, and dripped even deeper to moisten the cleft in his body.

"Ah—angh! Sir...do I have to...?"

Toya wasn't withering under Hodaka's gaze; far from it: he was getting even more excited, panting heavily.

"What are you expecting me to do?" Hodaka asked.

"You wouldn't—!"

"Tell me what you want."

Toya's face was bright red, and he looked up at Hodaka with tears in his eyes. His lips trembled, and even Hodaka couldn't help but be fascinated by the provocative display.

"I—I want to come."

"Is that all?"

"I want you...to make me come, sir..."

Toya spoke desperately and urgently, and Hodaka felt his heart squeezing tight with affection.

"How?"

"Fill me up...inside...with your huge thing... make me come."

"That's good, but you're not ready for that yet."

Hodaka couldn't bring their bodies together without warming Toya's body up first. His bud, which knew how to take in a man, rubbed over the sheets as he thrust his hips franticly into the air.

"Please—be quick."

"Then stop holding your legs open. Press down here while I loosen you up. Can you do that?"

Hodaka spoke gently but firmly, and pressed Toya's right hand down on his own member. As soon as Toya took a firm grip as told, his body leapt in the air, but Hodaka paid no attention to him. He bent Toya at the waist and buried his face between Toya's legs.

"Ungh—agh! Stop!"

Toya's voice wavered as Hodaka suddenly began licking the folds at his entrance. But since he didn't actually want Hodaka to stop, it was nothing more than a reaction of surprise at having such a sensitive place stimulated.

"Nngh! Ahh—agh!"

"How does it feel when I lick you here?"

"—so good..."

"You like it when I fill you up, don't you? Look, you just sucked my finger right in. You're squeezing me so tight. You're even more eager than usual."

"A—angh! Sir—even your finger—it's so..."

Hodaka rubbed against Toya's hot, swollen folds with his finger, kneading firmly against the spot just inside, making Toya whimper in ecstasy. Because Toya was holding himself back with his own hand, he seemed to be mounting toward the sublime without ever ejaculating. His sobs were beautiful.

Hodaka pressed his lips to the inside of Toya's thighs, trying to spread the sensation, leaving sharp marks on his delicate skin. He took out some lube and spread it onto Toya, making him cringe in shock at how cold it was. But because Toya's flesh was so hot, the gel melted almost immediately and Hodaka's finger moved in and out much more smoothly.

"So all you want is my finger?"

"No—don't be so mean…"

"How selfish," Hodaka said dismissively. He tried to pull his finger out, but Toya's loosened folds caught weakly at his finger, clinging to it and holding him in. But Hodaka massaged the flesh that clung to him and gently pulled out. Toya sobbed with exquisite pleasure.

Hodaka turned Toya over so that Toya's back was to him, and he pushed his own engorged flesh against Toya's twitching pucker.

"Do you want this?" Hodaka asked.

"Yes…yes! Give it to me!" Toya slurred these words over and over.

Pulling the slim muscles of Toya's buttocks apart, Hodaka thrust inside.

"Ahhh!"

Hodaka pushed in as far as he could, and Toya struggled to bear the fierce friction. To help, Toya loosened his grip on himself and, a moment later, as he mounted to the highest peak, he reached his orgasm.

Thick semen covered his lower body and the sheets, and his flushed walls clamped down on Hodaka, clinging to him desperately. Grabbing Toya's hips, still connected, Hodaka pulled Toya to his knees. Toya's weight pushed him down and forced Hodaka further inside, so that Toya let out a pained groan.

"If it hurts, I can stop," Hodaka offered, but Toya

shook his head.

"I'm fine—"

Toya forced out a voice as sweet as his flesh was tight around Hodaka's shaft. He tried to steal a peek from behind, but couldn't see Hodaka's face. Still, Toya's body shuddered rapturously as he panted roughly without stop.

"Play with them yourself," Hodaka whispered, guiding Toya's hands to his nipples. That was enough for Toya to realize what he needed to do and, his body sagging forward, he started to tease his nipples.

"Sir—it's good. So good…"

"Does it really feel that good?"

"Y—yes. There—harder!"

Toya's words were halting, repeated again and again. Hodaka found it terribly endearing and he swallowed Toya up in his arms. As if even the touch of Hodaka's shirt against the bare skin of his back was too much, Toya's body slumped as he let out a moan. Turning his hips, he guided Hodaka to the heights of pleasure.

"Ungh! Right there!" Toya cried.

"Tell me what you feel."

"No—no, I ca—nngh!"

Gripping Toya's slender hips and moving them up and down was all it took to make the overlapping folds of his body slurp wetly. Toya became delirious from his insatiable desire and the feel of Hodaka rubbing inside his body. He rocked his hips eagerly, easily greeting another climax.

"Tell me," Hodaka insisted.

"I feel y—your—"

"You're so adorable," Hodaka whispered, and took his hands off of Toya's hips to stroke his penis once again. Toya's hips rocked obscenely. It was so enticing, so poignant and lewd, that Hodaka knew he would remember that night for a long time.

## Chapter Four

There was still some time before the meeting. Fidgeting, Toya alternated between looking at his watch and looking at Makihara, who sat beside him.

"What's wrong? You seem restless."

"I don't think I've ever met Mister Hodaka with you, Mister Makihara."

"That's true. But Missus Takemoto will be here, too, so why worry?"

It had been almost two years since Toya had taken over managing Hodaka, but his previous editor, Makihara, hadn't passed Hodaka on directly. There hadn't been any opportunities for the three of them to get together.

They had seen each other at the party celebrating the 300,000th copy sold of *Emergence,* but many other colleagues had been there, too. It would be the first time with just the three of them.

It was hard for Toya because Makihara knew about his relationship with Hodaka. He knew Makihara was considerate enough not to discuss private matters, but there was something unsettling about meeting with his boss and his lover for work.

The meeting was about the fan book, and since Hodaka was going to be in a part of town far from the office, they had decided to meet at a hotel café.

"By the way, how was the product meeting?" Toya asked, and he saw Makihara's expression turn young at the mention of the sales department.

"Nothing specific. They really harped on the problem of returned books again."

Many of the authors Toya managed sold well, but if he slacked off, he never knew if the sales numbers would fall. The hardest job of all was keeping an eye out for that turning point. He had to think about somehow anticipating the needs of the readers, so ever since Toya had joined the editorial department, he had always put a lot of effort into going to bookstores and giving surveys to find out reader opinions. Just because a book was good didn't mean it would sell: that was the curse of the business.

Toya looked back at the entrance once again and saw a tall man coming toward them from the lobby. Toya started to get up reflexively, but Hodaka saw them first and, turning down a waiter's offer of help, walked over to them.

Hodaka was so flawlessly gorgeous that it always took Toya's breath away. Even at a distance he was captivating. There wasn't even a hint of feminine softness in him, but neither was he overtly masculine. The word "androgynous" didn't fit, either. Kai Hodaka was Kai Hodaka—it was the only way to describe him. His mere entrance caused a commotion from a group of women in the lobby.

Did this man who had everything ever get bored of life? Maybe that very thought was proof that Toya was just an ordinary person.

"I'm sorry. It looks like I've kept you waiting," Hodaka said.

"Not at all. We're sorry to have called you all the way out here."

Makihara grinned cheerfully, and Toya went on.

"Missus Takemoto isn't here yet, either," he offered apologetically, but Hodaka answered generously.

"There's still five more minutes."

"I'm sorry I'm late," said a female voice. They looked up and saw a gracefully beautiful, sophisticated woman standing beside them.

The artist Yukie Takemoto was a friend of Hodaka's from high school, a real star with her own art exhibition opening overseas.

Her friendship with Hodaka was famous since she had designed covers for several of Hodaka's short story collections. Hodaka had pressed her to do the cover for the new book and had contacted her directly about it. At the same time, they had discussed doing lithographs of images from Hodaka's novels for the book, and so they'd all decided to meet.

"I just got here myself," Hodaka said in a friendly voice, and she smiled with relief. Yukie was nothing more than a friend to Hodaka, but Toya found her easy smile strangely upsetting.

Why was that?

Toya noticed Hodaka's friendly tone for the first time. It was shocking to see him open up his personal side so freely with another person, and Toya was surprised to realize that he felt jealous. Something bitter rose in his throat, confusing him. It was ridiculous to get jealous of someone he was working with.

"What would you like to drink?" Toya asked and offered everyone menus. Yukie accepted hers with a radiant smile and a "thank you."

She was an impressive woman: she could have been an actress or a model, but the aura of intelligence she carried was extremely elegant. It sent waves rippling through the air.

There was nothing flashy about her; instead, she carried a trace of placid kindness that could appeal to a person's heart. If Hodaka were to choose a life partner, it would be someone like her.

Getting original work from Yukie was the chance of a lifetime, but why did Hodaka insist on her? Toya hated himself for thinking something so petty. He just couldn't be happy.

"What's wrong, Mister Sakurai? You look flushed," Yukie asked, sounding concerned, but Toya shook his head quickly.

"You were in the same class as Mister Hodaka in high school, is that right?"

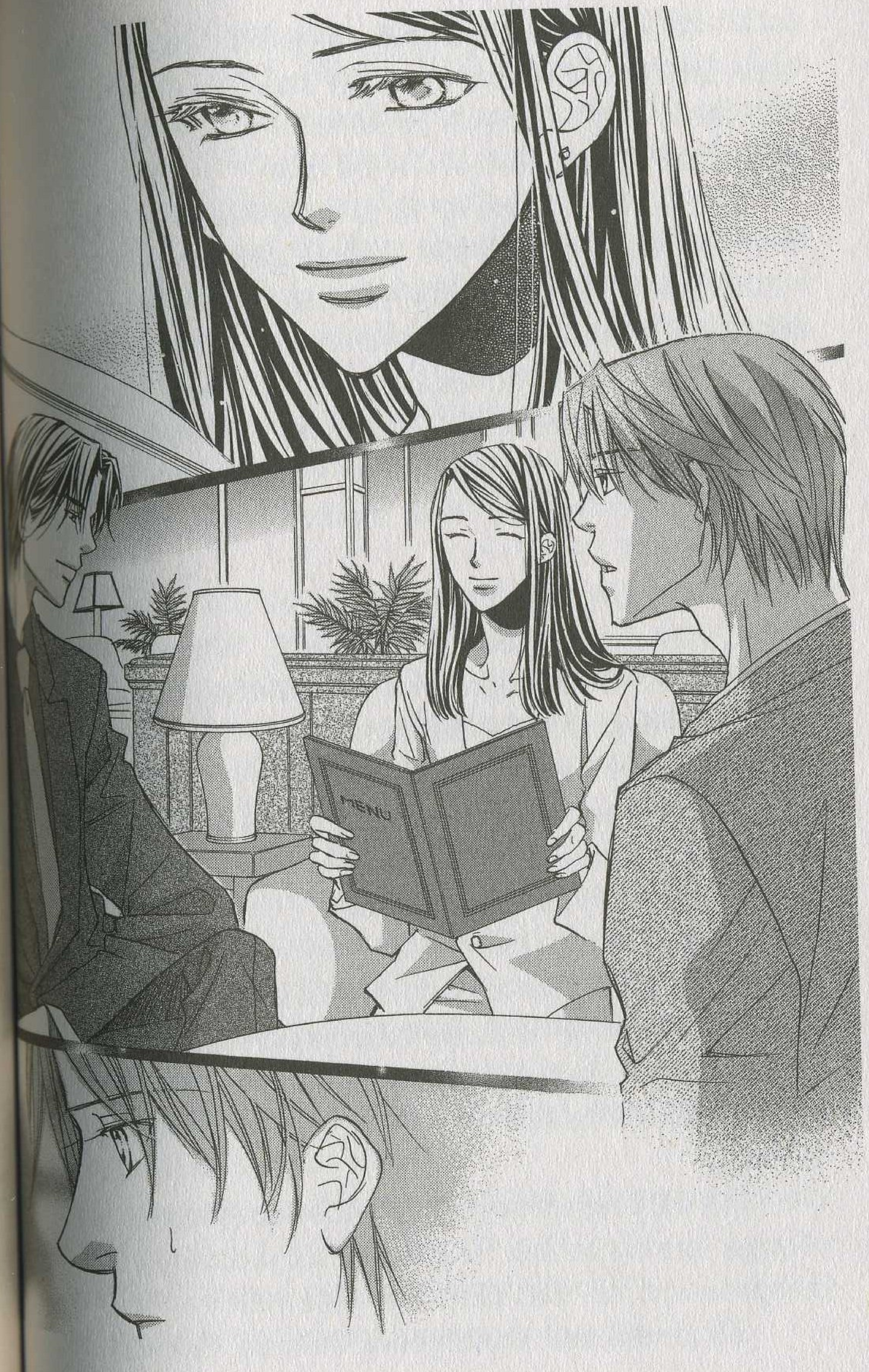
"Yes. Somehow, we made it through the whole thing together."

She gave a small smile. Her unpretentious attitude really won Toya over.

"That's amazing. What was he like back then?"

"He was always a little detached, so he's not much different now. But I think his age finally fits him."

They would have been in high school almost twenty years before. Toya felt an undeniable envy of Yukie for knowing Hodaka back then.



“When we were in school and the other students were being rowdy during study hall, he acted like he was above it all. But you could really count on him, and everyone in class always adored him.”

“You’re not going to get anything by flattering me,” Hodaka smirked, and Yukie laughed.

“But it’s the truth. Oh! He also wasn’t in any clubs, but he did a lot of work for the student government.”

“The student government?” Toya said, surprised.

Hodaka usually seemed self-reliant and independent, like he would never fall into step with anyone else. But he had worked with the student government?

“Whatever job Hodaka took on, it went smoothly. There was a huge demand for him. When he was a senior, there was a fight between committee members who all wanted him for different jobs.”

“Really? I never knew that.”

“That’s enough reminiscing for now,” Hodaka cut in, looking warningly at Yukie.

“Oh! Are you embarrassed?”

“No, I’m not, but it’s not why we’re here.”

“But if they’re making a book about you for your fans, you have to include bittersweet stories of your adolescence. Especially someone like you, who’s such a mystery man. I’m sure your fans want to know that sort of thing.”

As she laughed brightly, Toya poured three spoonfuls of sugar into his coffee. He gazed at the unsteady course of his spoon and his heart filled with bitterness.

Kindness and intelligence colored Yukie’s every word. That warmth was surely something only Yukie could give Hodaka. When Toya asked himself if he could do the same, he could only answer in the negative. And Hodaka’s history, which he was ignorant of, slept inside her. That alone put Toya at a disadvantage.

If Hodaka asked Toya about his past, Toya would tell him everything. But what would Hodaka do? Would he tell Toya anything at all that was hidden behind that heavy veil of secrecy?

Toya wished he’d met Hodaka earlier. He wanted to monopolize everything about him.

Leaning against the bar, Hodaka put a cigarette between his lips and lit it. Yukie sat on a stool beside him, watching him. The corner of her mouth twitched upward in a smile.

“Is that editor your boyfriend?”

Hodaka’s face tensed at the unexpected question. Yukie came into town so rarely that she wanted to stay and talk with Hodaka a little longer, so the two of them had split off from Toya and Makihara after dinner. Toya, on the other hand, said that he’d just finished a manuscript the day before and needed sleep, so Hodaka knew he’d be in bed.

“Do you really think Mister Makihara is my type?”

“You know I meant Mister Sakurai.”

“You’re too smart for your own good.”

"I knew it! I just had a feeling about him. You were both acting like you didn't know each other, but Mister Sakurai didn't seem to like me at all."

Yukie casually swept back her long hair, a wedding ring glinting on her hand. She smiled teasingly at Hodaka. Discerning his weak spot put Yukie in a good mood.

"So that's why you told all those stories about me in high school," Hodaka said.

"I was just being nice. It worked pretty well, didn't it?"

"I wonder. Don't you need to be getting home? You just got married."

"My husband's in Paris on business. I got bored."

Yukie had gotten married three months ago. Her new husband came from a family of artists and they had met at one of Yukie's shows.

"You should have gone with him."

"Are you saying you don't want to see me? I don't like being brushed off, you know!"

Hodaka smiled grimly and took a gulp of his single malt. Judging from its mellow, woody aroma, he knew it would give him a bad hangover.

"I just thought that, since you're a newlywed, you should put your husband first. I'll always make time for you."

"I'm surprised to hear you be so considerate, Hodaka."

"Why?" Hodaka asked frankly, and she knit her eyebrows.

"It's a very human thing to do. You're putting the

people you care about first. I guess that means you have some good qualities, too."

"Did you think I only had bad ones?"

"It's not that. Remember how I said you were detached? I thought you didn't have any interest in the ordinary world."

"If I didn't, I couldn't write my novels."

Mystery novels were about more than the twist at the end: the motive for the crime was also essential. The reader wouldn't identify with the story if the author simply wrote armchair fantasies about how he thought people were.

"But how could you tell that I was involved with him?" Hodaka asked.

Hodaka and Toya tried to act as inconspicuously as possible, so Hodaka was a little confused. It was almost unheard of for someone to pick up on something he kept hidden. But if he was that easy to read, something had to change.

"It's just because I've known you for so long. Don't worry. No one's going to figure it out."

"All right," Hodaka said, relieved to hear that.

"You mean, you even remember to think about appearances for his sake?"

"Apparently."

"Is this the same Kai Hodaka I knew? I can't believe it."

Hodaka's lips pulled into a slight smile at her deliberate joke.

"I'm thinking about how I can be myself. However things change, I'm still the same Kai Hodaka."

"That shocking excess of self-confidence hasn't changed," Yukie said with puffed out cheeks, and then laughed. "It's going to be so much fun working with your lover. I'm so jealous that you found someone like that."

There was very little Hodaka could do for Toya. But he wanted to help him however he could. Wasn't it natural to wish for that, as his lover?

"I want to do something for him," Hodaka said.

Yukie frowned in confusion, not quite understanding him.

"Is that why you introduced me to Sozan Publishing?"

"That was because I wanted you to create my covers."

"But look at how excited you are about this fan book. That's the sort of project you could leave to the editors if you wanted to."

When she offered evidence like that, Hodaka couldn't deny it. She might even say it was proof that he was embarrassed if he did tried to.

"Does your silence mean I hit the bull's-eye?"

"No, I was just marveling at your perceptiveness," Hodaka said with a slight smile.

"Well, it's the first time. I hope your project goes well. So, are there any images you want me to include in the cover design? Should I use a cocoon or an insect to tie in with your third book?"

"What about cherry blossoms?"

Hodaka spoke the idea absently, and at first Yukie didn't seem to get it, but then she finally chuckled.

"It'll be completely out of season, but…you sound so devoted to this man."

"It was a joke. I'll leave the design to you."

"Either way, the fact that you're saying things like that is bizarre. You must like him a lot. It almost makes me jealous."

"I just want to make something good. I can't wait to see how it turns out."

Hodaka wasn't going to make more fan books. This one would be the first and last chronicle of his career. Because of that, he wanted to make it high quality. He wanted to make his work with Toya better. If he did, the nights he stayed at Toya's side and brought him deep sleep would increase at the same time.

That image filled Hodaka with happiness.

It seemed Toya had drunk a bit too much.

After the meeting, Hodaka and Yukie said they were going out for drinks together, so Toya saw them off in a taxi. When he got back to his apartment, it was almost ten o'clock.

During the meal, the wedding ring glinting on Yukie's finger hadn't given Toya any relief at all. If the word marriage had any authority, there wouldn't be such a thing as affairs. The guilt of it only encouraged immoral relationships. He`d experienced it himself.

When Toya had started his relationship with Hodaka, he had ignored the fact that he had Miwa, his fiancée, and abandoned himself to his lust for Hodaka.

Just how close *were* Yukie and Hodaka?

Toya thought they might have been lovers once, but if so, they wouldn't have been able to interact so elegantly.

When they had talked about Hodaka as a student, Toya got even tenser. He wanted to ask more about it, but the woman had shared three years with Hodaka, a time that Toya could never have. When he realized that, Toya felt jealousy plugging his heart.

He understood that he was the only one Hodaka loved now, and there hadn't been any rumors of a woman in Hodaka's life either. Toya couldn't even tell if Hodaka had any female friends that he saw in private.

Because of that, Yukie's existence had come as a shock. There was someone besides Toya that Hodaka let down his defenses for. Such a little thing sent Toya's heart into complete disarray. Was it impossible for Toya to find out about Hodaka's past?

Toya didn't know what Hodaka had done before he became an author. There was a blank of several years between when Hodaka graduated from school and when he started writing. No one in the industry knew how he had spent those years. If Toya just asked Hodaka directly, he would probably tell him, but Toya was afraid of looking nosy, so he couldn't ask.

Finding out through work was one thing. Toya could just ask, and try to pry into his private life, but whether or not Hodaka would answer was another matter.

"Oh!"

The thought struck Toya like a revelation and he bolted up in bed. It was so simple! He could get Hodaka to discuss his upbringing and school life in all the detail he wanted in the long interviews. And he would get him to touch on it in the essays, too.

Considering the themes of *Emergence* and *Incubation* were growth and love, it wouldn't be unusual to delve into the origins of Hodaka's creative life in childhood experiences and romances.

And that way Toya would know Hodaka's upbringing—all in one.

Suddenly cheerful again, Toya opened the proposal on his laptop that had been left sitting on the dinner table.

Hodaka did not seem to have a very receptive attitude to the proposal Toya had given him. He sat in his usual place in the living room and crossed his long legs. Hodaka kept any recognizable expression from his face and it was hard to tell what he was thinking.

"Have you given any consideration to the email I sent you the other day, sir?"

Toya hadn't heard a response from Hodaka, but Makihara's reaction to the new idea had been extremely positive—maybe because the stories Yukie had told them about Hodaka's time in high school had been so interesting. The ghostwriter had agreed to the plan, too, so if they could just get Hodaka's approval, they could put together the outlines for the fan book.

"Absolutely not."

There was no hesitation in his response, and no mistaking it. It was almost instantaneous, and, even as it shocked Toya, he couldn't help but feel that it was very like Hodaka.

"Why do you say that?"

"The fan book is about Kai Hodaka the author. My childhood has nothing to do with that."

Had Toya negotiated badly? He felt deeply disturbed, but he still had his wits about him enough to keep it off his face.

"But we discussed from the very beginning that we'd like to explore your past as well as your present."

"I'm not interested in mixing the professional and personal," Hodaka said firmly, staring into Toya's eyes.

"What do you mean, sir?"

Toya's voice shook, disconcerted by the feeling that Hodaka had seen straight through him.

"The problem is that we don't need photos and stories about my childhood for this fan book. It's just information you want to know yourself, isn't it?"

"Well…"

When Hodaka posed the question like that, Toya lacked the confidence to declare that those things were absolutely essential elements in telling the story of Kai Hodaka.

Hodaka knew. He knew that Toya was trying to explore his past for his own sake while pretending it was for the readers. Toya didn't want to expose the man's private life to other people, but out of necessity, he was

attempting a cowardly abuse of power.

"Besides, even if I wanted to give photos to you, I don't have any," Hodaka said.

"Impossible. You must have at least a few?"

"Not even one."

What a feeble excuse. Hodaka had been alive for thirty-some years; how could he not even have one photo from his past? Even if Hodaka hated having his photo taken as a child, there would still be photos of him as a baby, before he had any choice.

"In that case…you could just tell us the stories you've enjoyed recently. If you tell the readers something like that about your life, I think it will give them a more vivid picture of Kai Hodaka the author."

Toya had come up with another plan in case Hodaka was against the first. Hodaka looked like he wanted to comment on Toya's persistence, but he simply shook his head.

"I don't think I can agree even to something like that. My territory belongs to me and it's not something I'll discuss in detail with strangers."

"I see…"

"There are things I'll go along with and things I won't. I didn't think I needed to repeat that with you, but I should have said it at the very beginning."

Toya could only hang his head at such a thorough scolding. Was Hodaka not excited about making this fan book after all? Had Toya abused his position as Hodaka's lover and pressured him to do something he didn't want to do?

"If that's all you wanted to talk about, could you leave now?" Hodaka asked.

"What—?"

"I'm sorry, but I have an important meeting soon."

Hodaka had to be lying. He always kept a certain pace in his life no matter what—he would have scheduled enough time for the meeting with Toya. Toya didn't think he would ever make sudden plans. It had been almost two years since he'd gotten together with Hodaka, but the man had never broken that routine. He just wanted to chase Toya away.

"I'm sorry for intruding on you. I have a book to edit for tomorrow, so I'll be going back to the office now."

"All right. Come again when we can take things a bit more leisurely."

Now, even the sweet words that were so unlike Hodaka sounded like mere pretense. Even though Toya knew Hodaka would never do something like that.

"Thank you very much, sir."

Even after taking a shock like that, and being completely deflated, Toya could act perfectly normal. That was his pride as an adult man.

"I just want you to know, I don't think this proposed book is a bad idea in itself. I'm looking forward to it, too, so I don't want it to be sloppy."

Toya had stood up and turned his back before Hodaka spoke those words.

"Thank you, sir."

Hodaka went on, making Toya wonder how he'd taken his perfunctory politeness.

"Just do what you can. As long as you make sure the quality of the proposals is high, I don`t care."

"All right."

So in essence, the idea to talk about his personal history meant nothing to Hodaka? Toya still had a lot of trouble figuring him out.

"I'm worried about those documents I asked you for. Do you have any news?" Hodaka asked, turning the conversation abruptly to the book after *Chrysali*s catching Toya off guard. Hodaka was in the middle of collecting documents for that project. He was always looking toward the future, never stopping for a moment. Not like Toya, who got bogged down in the present.

"We're still ordering them. I'm sorry it's taking so long."

"That's fine. Tell me when they come."

"Yes sir. I'm looking forward to the completion of *Chrysalis,* too…Well then, goodbye."

Toya bowed, and then stomped out of Hodaka's apartment and toward the elevator. He felt so pathetic. Until he cooled down, putting some distance between them would have a soothing effect. Worse things had shaken their relationship before, and now Toya was confident that Hodaka cared about him.

But still, hearing his lover speak to him so harshly made Toya's heart ache. Toya knew he should talk to Hodaka again and tell him honestly that he wanted to know more about his past. He had to go back and talk to him.

Toya had already walked out of the building, but he turned to go back. At that moment, a young woman was standing in front of the intercom, tapping in a room number. Toya's fingerprint was registered, so there was no need to follow such a procedure, but something stopped him from going up unannounced.

"Mister Hodaka? It's Murata," the woman proclaimed cheerfully, and Toya's eyes widened.

A scallion poked out of her bags. She wasn't the maid, so what on earth was she doing? A moment later, an unpleasant feeling rose in Toya's throat.

Hodaka sat on the sofa for a little bit after Toya left. He didn't think Toya would go to the trouble of coming back when Hodaka had a guest coming.

*So they want my history, huh?*

Hodaka understood what Toya was saying, so he had a mixed opinion. If he'd known things would turn out like this, he would have saved some of his old photos.

When he recalled Toya's uncomprehending face, it made Hodaka feel sorry for him. He drummed his fingers on the armrest irritably. He could probably find his elementary school yearbook if he looked for it, but he had gotten rid of everything else since he'd never really liked having his picture taken. The few photos he'd had left, he'd put into his parents' coffins after the accident.

Hodaka stroked his lip with his thumb and made a small sound.

That was when he'd decided to live the rest of his life alone. He'd made a clean break with the past in order to give it a clear ending. But maybe that was simply a justification made after the fact.

He knew how immature he'd been, so whenever those memories resurfaced, the bitterness that filled his throat wouldn't go away. It had been Toya who had taught him that he was an incomplete human being.

Hodaka had thought he could live alone. Even if he had needed to borrow his parents' strength when he was first born, he wanted to stand under his own power after that.

But when he thought about it now, that didn't seem right. Toya had given Hodaka new values. Living on his own wasn't everything. Feeling sad when he couldn't see Toya, being hurt by his lover's words, or being filled by them: such emotions weren't bad. Hodaka hadn't known that until he met Toya.

Silent now, Hodaka took out the big glossy cookbook called *Delicious Breakfasts* that he had hastily hidden under some papers when Toya came over. It was by the food scientist Rikako Arimoto, a former housewife, and offered an assortment of menus for breakfasts. Hodaka had picked it up by chance in the store, and then become interested in the author.

Just then, the intercom buzzed and Hodaka stood up.

# *Chapter Five*

Two weeks went by and Toya didn't see Hodaka at all. They exchanged phone calls and e-mails in that time, but the ghostwriter had taken over and the fan book was progressing smoothly.

Except for the plan he'd mentioned the other day for an article called "How Does Kai Hodaka Do It?" which had been rejected, everything was going according to plan.

As a compromise, Hodaka had dug out two unpublished short stories. Other important documents and data were going into an enormous bibliography for exploring Hodaka's creative process. He had even allowed them to take photos of his library and study, but not the rest of his home.

Because editing the fan book was taking so much time, Hodaka gave permission to push back the release date for *Chrysalis*. He had a policy to never let anyone see his manuscripts until they were complete, so if they weren't careful, they wouldn't be able to write articles about *Chrysalis* for the fan book until the very last minute. If there was still time before the release date, it wouldn't pose any problems. *Chrysalis* was apparently ready to go, and Toya was eager to read it.

Toya was sure their work would please Hodaka, but he still couldn't cheer up. He was getting gradually more expectant. He was used to receiving special treatment from Hodaka and being spoiled. That very knowledge scared him. He wondered if the day would come when Hodaka would turn his back on him because of that brazenness.

Had that young woman with the food gone to Hodaka's apartment to have an affair? Another editor wouldn't playact by bringing food over, so Toya's suspicions only deepened. He was angry that he couldn't demand who she was. And so his thoughts continued to grow bleaker.

Toya had received the documents that Hodaka had asked for the other day, but he didn't feel like delivering them personally, so he wound up taking them home with him. But at this point it would seem too impersonal to just mail them. After long hours agonizing over it, he decided to drop by Hodaka's after his roundtable debate with Amano that night and give the documents to him then.

Toya was just wasting time thinking about such nonsense. If he didn't leave soon, he would be late.

Makihara was supposed to attend this discussion as well, but his editing was near a deadline, so he had gone to the printers instead. Amano had said that if fewer people came, he thought he'd be able to ask more pointed questions. Toya decided to respect his judgment.

It made Toya nervous that Makihara, who could mediate if things got uncomfortable, wouldn't be there, but there was no helping it.

Toya left work and hurried to the restaurant where

they were holding the meeting. The restaurants Makihara had recommended, many of them high-end Japanese restaurants, were often used for these sorts of interviews and discussions because they had private rooms.

Toya usually kept his face tightly formal at such classy restaurants, but Makihara had confessed that he liked the back rooms because he didn't have to sit so stiffly through the entire meal.

But what would the discussion be like?

Toya didn't have much confidence in his ability to act as moderator, so he felt conflicted. Although Amano and Hodaka had both agreed to the interview, Toya wasn't so innocent as to think that meant there were no hard feelings between them.

Thinking these things over carefully, Toya entered the restaurant and greeted the hostess. He was led to their private room, and he waited, alone and restless, for the two writers to arrive. At last, he heard a cheerful laugh in the distance.

It was Amano…but it seemed like he was talking to Hodaka.

Toya perked up his ears in surprise. Just listening to the tone of their voices through the paper walls, they sounded very sociable. When Amano said something that sounded like a joke, Hodaka responded, seemingly upbeat. There didn't seem to be any sarcasm or irony, and that surprised Toya.

The hostess slid the screen door open. Amano and Hodaka stood behind her. Amano looked at Toya and smiled, but it seemed to Toya that there was no more familiarity in it than necessary.

"It's good to see you again, Mister Sakurai. I can't wait to get started."

"Likewise. Thank you both for coming today."

Toya made the usual greetings and bowed his head deeply. The two sat down, seeming somehow shy, but then the discussion went completely smoothly.

Amano was a self-declared fan of Hodaka's, so he read pretty deeply into the man's works. And he seemed to have given his questions a lot of thought before coming.

Hodaka seemed to sense that, and he answered with real enjoyment.

"What effect have the general themes in *Emergence* and *Incubation* had on the works that will follow them?" Amano asked.

"If I tell you, it won't be interesting anymore."

"Oh come on! Give me a hint."

Analyzing Hodaka's trilogy as an author made Amano's attempt unique. And as Hodaka wrestled with his creativity, Amano brought invigorating new emotions when he questioned him. Plus, Toya realized that Amano was confronting Hodaka's books much more earnestly than he'd expected.

The two of them could clearly delineate between professional and personal matters. Toya, it turned out, was the only one who couldn't do that. Toya was so pathetic.

"In that case, I look forward to seeing what the themes will be in your next book. Don't you agree, Mister Sakurai?" Amano asked.

"Uh—yes, I think so, too."

It was no longer clear who was playing the role of host. Smirking at himself, Toya let Amano set the pace and carry the discussion forward. The roundtable ended smoothly before dinner and the meal itself was very friendly.

"I really do respect you as an author, Mister Hodaka," Amano said.

They had had some saké, and Amano seemed to be a little drunk, since he was repeating himself. His cheeks were flushed, making it obvious that he'd had too much to drink.

"But you have some opinions about me as an individual, right?" Hodaka asked.

Amano laughed at his observant statement. "You can tell?"

"Yes," Hodaka said with a smile as he glanced at Toya. "But if you respect me as an author, that's enough. I don't particularly care if you respect me as a person."

"Thanks for saying it for me," Amano smiled, carefree, but he seemed very drunk.

Toya knew that Amano and Hodaka had personal issues between them, and, since the interview, there was no problem with relaxing a bit. It would be rude to put an end to it, but Amano's eyes had started to glaze over and he was slurring his words. Whatever he was trying to say had become incoherent and Toya felt uneasy.

"All that's left on the menu is the fruit. Would you like some tea?" Toya asked, trying to distract Amano, but Amano just shook his head feebly.

"Well, then shall we call it a day? I don't think I could eat another bite," Toya said. "And I want to thank you both for coming today."

Toya got up to pay the bill, and then flagged two taxis. He had to make sure Amano got home safely.

"Are you all right, Mister Amano?" he asked once he'd gotten him inside the taxi and Amano answered with a weak "yes."

Toya had been to Amano's apartment before, so he knew it wasn't very far away, which was good, but he had planned to give Hodaka the documents he'd asked for. There were a lot of them, and some valuable items, too. Now that something had happened, the fact that Toya had left them at home was backfiring. Hodaka didn't need them immediately, but Toya was still breaking a promise so he sent Hodaka a text message saying he would bring the documents over tomorrow.

"Here we are," the driver said at almost the same moment that Toya hit the send button.

"Thank you. Can you walk, Mister Amano?"

Amano had fallen asleep in the taxi, but he would be in for worse later. Toya slung Amano's arm over his shoulder and started climbing the stairs to his apartment.

"Do you have your key?"

"Nngh…"

Amano got his key out of his pocket and tried to fit it in the keyhole, but he couldn't find it in the dark.

"Let me try," Toya said and took the key to open the door. He helped Amano take his shoes off, and then entered his apartment with a quiet apology for intruding.

Toya remembered that Amano used a futon, so he hurried into the back and spread it out on the floor. Amano probably hadn't been expecting guests, but his room was pristine.

"You should take your pants and jacket off, sir. They'll get wrinkled. Your necktie, too."

But Amano burrowed into the futon, so Toya had to help him. He had taken care of drunk friends often in college, and he was struck with a sudden nostalgia.

"Do you mind?" Toya asked.

After he got permission, he took off Amano's jacket and necktie. Next, he went to the bathroom in search of a bucket and set it beside his pillow. He peeked into the fridge, hoping to find some vitamin enriched water to put by the futon, but there was only milk. So Toya decided to go to the nearest convenience store to buy some. He had seen one when they came in the taxi and it wasn't far.

He checked his cell phone on the way out, but there were no new messages. Hodaka must not have seen his message yet. He checked the sent message folder to reassure himself and it looked like the message had gone through.

He wondered what had happened. It seemed like he should have gotten an answer from Hodaka. His thoughts momentarily threatened to dive somewhere very dark, but maybe Hodaka was just tired. He had drunk a lot, too. He might have gone to bed without checking his messages.

As long as Hodaka saw the message tomorrow morning, that was fine. If he saw that Toya had remembered about the documents right away, then he probably wouldn't mind that Toya hadn't delivered them before.

* * *

Dawn broke pale in the sky and Toya looked outside, rubbing his eyes. Perhaps because his cab driver was feeling sleepy from working through the night, he had talked the whole time Toya was in the cab.

Toya had never received an answer from Hodaka.

Maybe Hodaka was angry at Toya for looking after Amano. Or maybe he had fallen asleep. That night—no, last night, when he'd last seen Hodaka, he hadn't seemed annoyed that he'd put Amano first. But even though Toya remembered his promise quickly, he had still broken it. He had probably disappointed Hodaka, and when he thought of that, it depressed him.

The morning sunlight struck the city at an angle that made it look different from usual. The bizarre sensation of floating, like Toya had gotten lost in another world, stemmed from his fatigue.

He paid the cab fare and sluggishly climbed the stairs to his apartment. Toya walked down the hall toward his apartment, and then suddenly stopped in his tracks.

"You're late," Hodaka said, standing there by Toya's door.

"Sir—" Toya's voice squeaked out of him despite his effort to contain it. "Wh-what are you—?"

Toya never would have thought that Hodaka would be waiting for him. It was pretty absurd and irrational.

"We made a promise, didn't we?" Hodaka said, his voice a little tired, lacking its usual force.

"About the…documents?"

"That's right."

"I'm sorry. But you should have gone in. You have a key, don't you?"

"I didn't want to invade your privacy."

Toya was the same way. His thumbprint was recorded to get into Hodaka's building and he had a key. But when Hodaka was gone, he never dared to set foot inside. He felt like it was a rule between them.

"Didn't you see my message?"

"I saw it, but I wanted to wait for you. It was an interesting experience."

Even so, it was pretty baffling that Hodaka had waited there the whole night.

At first glance, Hodaka was the perfect example of a man. But that he surpassed that evaluation and all other thoughts was, perhaps, just a side effect of Toya's love. The thought alone made Toya's heart hurt. It was unbearably painful.

Toya moved before he even thought about it and clung to Hodaka. The great excitement and his impulsive embrace were enough to rock Hodaka's body momentarily.

"Toya, will you please let us in?"

"I want to stay like this."

Toya wanted to continue holding Hodaka in his arms. He wanted to convey, even just a little, the depth of his feelings. Wanted to make Hodaka understand, just a little, how precious he was to him. But of course, they couldn't stay out in the hallway forever, so Toya opened his door, blushing.

"Thank you for the discussion yesterday," Toya said.

He only had cheap bags of tea, but he made some hot black tea and brought it out. Hodaka shook his head magnanimously.

"It was fun," Hodaka said.

"R-really?"

"I've wanted to have a leisurely talk with Amano as an author. In private, anyway. I'm glad I was able to do it."

"I was sure you would be angry at me for taking Mister Amano home."

"You'd be a bad manager if you left him there. I'm not small-minded enough to get mad about that."

"Really?" Toya asked, reassuring himself.

Hodaka answered in a placid tone, "I don't lie."

"But I was convinced you didn't care about this book."

Normally, that might have been something Toya couldn't say, but he gathered all his courage to say it and saw a shadow of confusion passed over Hodaka's face.

"Me? If I didn't care, I would have pulled out at the very beginning."

"But you disliked so many of our proposals."

"You mean talking about my childhood?" Hodaka smirked, guessing.

"Not just that. You also refused the suggestions to recommend restaurants or tour your apartment."

"That's right."

"I…guess I was mixing up business and personal. I wasn't thinking of the book. It was just things I wanted to know. I wanted to know more about you, but I was too embarrassed to let you to find out," Toya said, faltering a bit.

"I hated showing anyone else your private life," Toya went on. "But if I didn't, I didn't think you would ever tell me anything. I regret it though. But, whether it's Kai Hodaka the author or Kai Hodaka the man, I want to be closer to you, sir."

Toya expressed everything that was in his heart and Hodaka gave him a rare, gentle smile.

"But I don't want strangers to see my memories of our time together. I'm sorry, but I'm much more selfish than you thought."

Toya's heart thudded loudly. How could Hodaka say such things so easily?

"Well then, will you write about the restaurants you like in the next book?"

"That would be lying to the readers."

Hodaka cut himself off, but then forced out the rest of his words, his actions filled with an unusual hesitation.

"But it's true that I don't have any photos."

"Can I ask why?" Toya asked after a moment's hesitation.

"I burned them all. I thought it would be easier if I didn't have any mementos of my parents."

"You should have just told me so!" Toya shouted impulsively.

"I…couldn't do that," Hodaka said, though his answer was evasive, as if it was difficult for him to say anything.

"Why not?"

"Even I'm embarrassed by the immature things I've done."

Finally, Toya was relieved. The photographs were bitter memories for Hodaka. It wasn't just the excess of youth. He felt remorse, trepidation, and indecision about choosing to throw away those memories. So even Hodaka wasn't totally free of such human emotions.

"That's fine. If you were perfect just as you are, then you wouldn't need me."

Hodaka opened his mouth for a moment, as if he wanted to say something, but Toya went on.

"I understand if I don't meet all your needs. I know there isn't much I can do for you. But…I think I can help you be happy. I'm an imperfect, immature person, too, so I might make mistakes now and then, and say selfish things, but I'm making an effort, so please don't hate me."

Toya got all of this out at once, and was surprised to see Hodaka with such a gentle expression.

"Do you think I could hate you?" Hodaka asked.

"I don't know. I'm so confused sometimes."

Toya was able to relax so much at that moment that it shocked even him.

"If you don't want me to know your past because you don't want me to think you're pathetic, I want to know that, too," Toya said.

"The past is just the past. No matter how much we struggle, it's just an accumulation of days that have gone," Hodaka said quietly. "If you find out one thing, you'll want to know everything. Then, I'll spend all my time with memories that have ended."

"Don't you wonder about my past, sir?"

"It wouldn't mean anything. The Toya Sakurai in front of me is everything I need."

Hodaka said that so easily it made Toya embarrassed to have dwelled so much on the past.

"So then who was the woman who came to see you the other day?" Toya asked.

"When?" Hodaka frowned dubiously.

"When I was leaving after giving you the proposal, I passed a woman carrying groceries."

"Ah, her." Hodaka stopped speaking briefly. "Can I tell you some other time?"

"As long as you tell me eventually, I don't care," Toya said and meant it.

The reason he felt so strangely calm was due to Hodaka's cool influence.

"I'm just as confused as you are. I still not sure how to treat you better," Hodaka said.

The sensation of Hodaka's fingertips trailing over Toya's cheek produced a poignant rhythm. Drawing nearer, and then pulling away. Then drawing near again. The madness of love was in that repetition.

"You should tell me when you think you're wrong about something. And you can say what you think of me. That's enough. Being able to start over that easily… that's love," Toya said.

"So I should tell you that I love you?"

Hodaka gave Toya the words he most wanted to hear with utter carelessness, and Toya's cheeks flushed.

"So you can say it after all…"

"You seem to have underestimated me."

Hodaka raised the corner of his mouth in amusement, and then sealed Toya's lips once more.

# Chapter Six

The phone on top of the table rang and Hodaka looked over at the screen. "Sozan Publishing" was displayed and Hodaka picked it up without any hesitation, though a small jolt of pain shot through his bandaged finger when he did.

"Yes?"

"Hello, sir. This is Sakurai, calling from Sozan Publishing."

Hodaka knew that, but he wasn't so immature that he would interrupt Toya's speech.

"I've got the answer on the research trip. It's officially approved!"

Toya sounded excited and it surprised Hodaka.

"The fan book is coming out to commemorate the completion of your trilogy, and the idea is that we can incorporate the content from this trip at the same time *Chrysalis* goes on sale. The numbers are coming back even b—"

Toya cut himself off quickly. He thought it was rude to discuss accounting with Hodaka. But since they were working, it was natural to be restrained, so Hodaka didn't worry about it.

"In any case, I'm glad they accepted it," Hodaka said.

"I agree, sir. Though, I'd like to go over the schedule with you one more time."

"I'll leave the planning to you. I don't have any business for a while. But try not to let it overlap too much with the editing for *Chrysalis*."

"Yes sir!" Toya's voice was utterly exuberant from start to finish.

In the end, they had decided on *A Journey into the Worlds of Kai Hodaka* for the fan book project. It would be like a travelogue of Hodaka's imaginary worlds.

Toya had his doubts, wondering whether the book would be too common, but the ghostwriter was adamant, arguing that they needed to delve into the world of the novels from the outside. Luckily, Hodaka had found the creative notes he'd used at the time, and the idea of doing a comparative travelogue with those earlier notes sounded interesting, so Hodaka had decided to take care of it himself.

In fact, his debut novel had come out more than five years ago and he hadn't been back to its setting since then. So they thought going back to that place after so long might offer a completely new view.

It had been almost two months since they had officially started work on the fan book, and Hodaka knew Toya was getting busier and busier as it neared its conclusion.

Hodaka was doing the final checks on *Chrysalis*, which would be released at the same time as the fan book. Sozan Publishing had officially announced the title for the novel following *Emergence* and *Incubation*, and it was already causing a lot of discussion. The fans were debating online about Hodaka's intention for the title.

If the theme of *Emergence* was rebirth and *Incubation* was birth, the theme of *Chrysalis* would be transformation. Officially, there was no link between this book and the other two, but Hodaka had prepared a surprising twist at the very end to tie it to the first two books.

Since Hodaka had taken more time to write this book than he usually did, he still hadn't turned *Chrysalis* over to Toya. Several parts of the fan book were waiting on the completion of the manuscript for *Chrysalis*, but there was still time. Really, Hodaka was more eager to let Toya read it than anything else.

What would his impressions be?

Until now, Hodaka had never written his novels for a specific reader. Of course he knew that there would be an audience, but he had written his novels while taking the market for granted. He had never thought about the personal reaction of people reading his books.

For some reason, his ears were suddenly warm.

Surprised, Hodaka went to the bathroom to see what had happened, and was shocked to see he was blushing. He was confused and glad that Toya hadn't seen him, because, in the end, he was just a bit pretentious. The fact that it had been so hard to say what had happened to his photographs was another instance of that.

Meeting Toya and interacting with him had made Hodaka confront a side of himself he'd never known about. But it wasn't unpleasant; on the contrary, it made him glad. Toya had become a part of him. He'd become Hodaka's sustenance.

It wasn't entirely a bad thing to be changed by someone. He thought he'd had an effect of some sort on Toya as well. In that way he knew that, little by little, he and Toya were compromising with each other and would find the key to understanding each other completely. He felt that someday he would be able to give Toya what he wanted and free his heart of all its anxieties.

For example, right now there was something he was working on.

Hodaka opened his hand. There were fine cuts even where there weren't bandages. It didn't keep him from typing, but he'd had no idea he was so clumsy.

Hodaka wanted to give Toya a delicious breakfast the next time he stayed over, so he'd been taking lessons that Toya couldn't know about. Hodaka was bursting with impatience to spend a morning with his lover.

"Here it is."

Toya and Hodaka walked up to a traditional black archway standing between the shops and houses on the old highway. Hodaka had wanted to walk from the train station, so it had taken fifteen minutes to get there, but Toya was surprised when he first caught sight of the archway.

"This is it?" Toya asked.

"Yes."

They had entered an entirely different atmosphere from the houses around them. It was a feeling particularly unique to that spot. It had no signs or any other markings at the entrance.

They passed under the archway that served as the front gate and walked up the stone pathway, an air of abandonment surrounding them. They couldn't even hear the noise of the road. It was as if, with each step, they retreated from the world.

They had gone there to recapture the conception of Hodaka's first novel. The building itself had been built in the sixteenth century. The current owner was the president of a large company, but he used the place for business retreats, so it didn't host guests regularly like a hotel.

Hodaka told Toya that the reason he'd been able to stay there before was because his late father had been friends with the owner. The place was full of memories for him and, in the light of evening, the checkered buildings defined the scene.

"The garden here is famous," Hodaka said. "I've been told it was made by a famous landscaper. It's very relaxing to take a stroll through it in the morning or evening."

As Hodaka spoke, a woman wearing a kimono came from that direction. The straight-backed, middle-aged woman looked at them both, and then bowed deeply.

"Welcome, gentlemen."

"It's been a while, but I'm glad to be back."

"We've been expecting you," the woman said with a tinkling laugh before leading them to the entrance.

"Is it just us staying here today?"

"Yes. The president told us in no uncertain terms that when Mister Hodaka stays here, we will not invite any other guests."

She motioned for them to enter a spacious room.

"This is the room you'll be staying in tonight. If you like, you can stay in a different room every night. That won't be a problem."

"How extravagant," Toya murmured in surprise, but the hostess heard him.

"We have many rooms available; it's a waste not to use them. The open-air baths connected to each room are slightly different as well, and they have an excellent reputation. So if you have any interest in that, I recommend it."

The hostess made some tea for them, and then disappeared after bidding them a pleasant evening. They were finally able to be alone.

They sipped their tea and Toya felt refreshed. He had been so thirsty that even the thick, bitter green tea was like sweet dew.

"Is this the room where you wrote, sir?"

"This is it. But all I did was figure out the plot. I gave you the notes, didn't I?"

"Oh—yes. These?"

Toya didn't want to lose the precious original copies, so he had brought a copy of Hodaka's notes. The originals were locked up tight in a safe at the office. Hodaka had told Toya there was no need to go to so much trouble for them, but there was only one copy of them in all the world. Any fan would consider them a treasure.

"I stayed here about a week. I had more time back then than I do now."

Toya wanted to know more about what Hodaka was like back then. He wanted to know much more. But he reined in those feverish feelings, born from his anxiety, and wondered if the day would come when he didn't need to know anything about Hodaka's past.

No, he was sure that day would come. If their bond was strong enough, his anxiety and doubts would disappear.

A breeze cut across the tranquil garden.

Toya and Hodaka had finished eating and bathing, and they walked through the garden in summer robes and sandals. Toya was powerfully aware of how far they were separated from everyday life.

The thong of Toya's sandal bit into the skin between his toes a little painfully, but he decided to put up with it. It wouldn't last long.

"We're here on business, but we hardly did anything all day," Toya said, striking up a conversation off-handedly.

Hodaka answered, clearly in an excellent mood. "That's a good thing sometimes."

"Aren't we mixing business and pleasure?"

"The night at least is for us."

Toya read a lewd nuance into the word "night," and grew embarrassed despite himself. Distracted, his foot slipped on a stepping stone and he fell backwards.

Hodaka reached out hurriedly to try and catch him, and Toya wound up falling entirely into Hodaka's arms. He felt the heat of Hodaka's body through his robe.

"Are you all right?" Hodaka asked.

"Thanks to you, yes."

"You've been quiet today. You're not thinking anything bad again, are you?"

Toya had to admire Hodaka's perceptiveness about other people.

"How did you know?"

"Tell me what it is."

With Hodaka's arms still around him, Toya spoke to his lover.

"I was thinking how incredibly happy I am. *Chrysalis* is an even more amazing novel than I'd hoped, and I'm so glad to have this job."

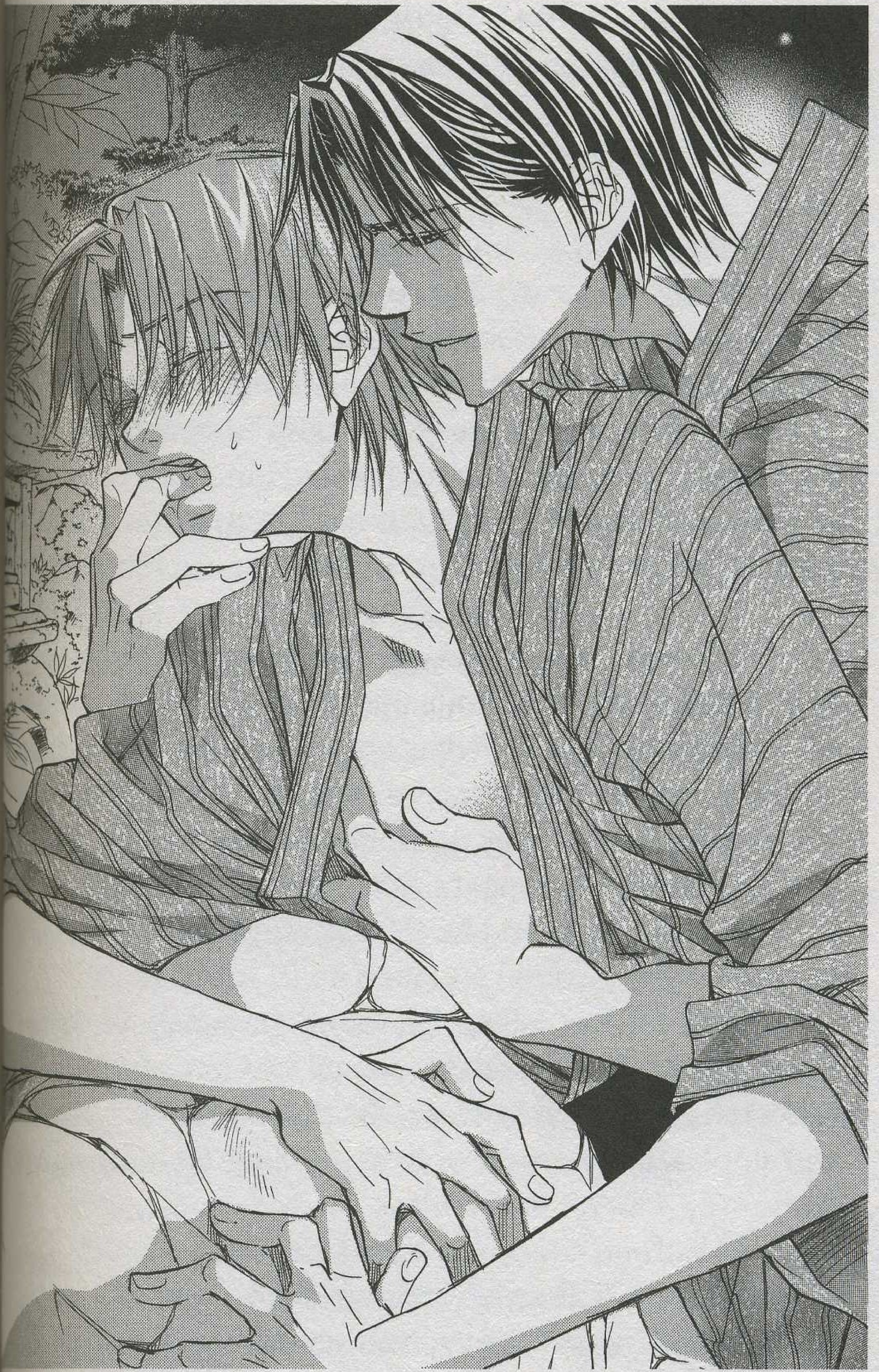
Toya truly meant that, without any dissembling. That was how powerful the trilogy's final volume was.

"It's made me realize that you do so much for me. Even though I say I want to help *you* be happy, there's so little I can do," Toya went on.

"That's your homework for tonight then: think about how you can make me happy," Hodaka said. Did it mean he was satisfied because he had Toya?

"Your heart is racing," Hodaka said. He touched the left side of Toya's chest and a sweet sigh escaped Toya immediately.

"Are you excited?" Hodaka asked. He kept moving his hand over Toya's robe, stroking him. Tracing around Toya's areolas, Hodaka urged the suddenly erect nipples with the flat of his fingers.



"S-sir—" Toya's voice was husky with surprise: he hadn't expected Hodaka to play with his nipples out in the open.

"Don't worry. I'm not going to torment you here."

"But—!"

Being held in that position, Toya could feel Hodaka's member pressing against his buttocks. When he felt the heat of it, his body couldn't help but shudder to its core in a conditioned reflex. His body, which knew the ecstasy of being devoured on a whim, was so fragile to pleasure. His leaping pulse refused to go back to normal. Instead, as his temperature rose, he felt it speed up.

"You're not wearing anything underneath?" Hodaka murmured with a laugh, stroking Toya's thigh.

But of course Toya wasn't wearing any underwear, Hodaka had told him not to. It hadn't been his idea. Though he didn't argue as Hodaka's fingers stroked his lips, and then thrust inside. When he shifted, the hem of his robe came open and he felt cool night air roll against his skin.

Except for them, the night garden was utterly silent. So that meant Toya's sexual excitement could be raised to a peak, but Toya feared that. It was hot, and he was unpleasantly aware of heat building up in his lower body.

"Mmf—"

Hodaka's fingers tangled with Toya's tongue, almost cradling it. That alone sent a sharp numbness through Toya's brain, and the ache growing in his loins spread through his entire body.

Hodaka reached down to stroke Toya's backside with his palm. He reached the pucker of flesh through the cloth of Toya's robe and a small cry escaped Toya.

"Ah—!"

Toya knew there was no one watching them. The garden was dark, and the only light came from a stone lantern beside the carved basin near the teahouse. But still, Toya was afraid of being seen. He couldn't stand it if he were caught in such a state.

Still, when Hodaka pinned him down, he longed for the man to push deeper. He wanted Hodaka to stir up his tight, hot body with complete abandon, to pour his seed inside until Toya overflowed with it.

Hodaka's fingers toyed with the flesh of Toya's mouth again and Toya's mind went blank. The manipulation of the soft flesh made Toya desperately impatient to take Hodaka into his body.

"Please, sir—stop!"

"What's wrong?"

Hodaka would get wet.

Toya felt as if the fluid that bubbled out of him had turned to nectar as it moistened his entire body. Sweat ran down his steamy skin. He felt it fall all the way to his ankles. Drops ran over the arch of his foot and wet the sole, making Toya rock with a moan.

"Shall we go back to the room then?"

Hodaka took his hands away, so Toya could finally breathe freely. He wiped his mouth off and looked at Hodaka, his eyes wet with lust. He began walking back on unsteady legs.

The bedding had already been laid out in their room, so Toya collapsed to his knees on top of it and Hodaka bent over him. When he touched Toya's shoulders, Toya's entire body shrunk away from him.

"Toya?"

"I'm sorry, I—"

It was a struggle for Toya to remember, but the inn belonged to Hodaka's friend. Was it all right to go all the way?

"You don't need to worry. I already told my friend I was bringing you along as my editor and lover on this trip. There's no problem."

Hodaka's lips formed into a smile, as if he'd picked up on the reason for Toya's concern, but Toya only felt more embarrassed when Hodaka said that and his cheeks flushed.

"Or do you want me to stop?"

Toya shook his head quickly, knowing that would only be torture. He was too excited, and his organ was so hard it hurt.

"But sir, if we do it, you have to turn out the light."

"Then I won't be able to see anything," Hodaka murmured softly. "Or is there something you don't want me to see?"

*Of course not...*

Toya understood. It wasn't that Hodaka didn't trust him, or was testing him, it was just their ritual.

"You can look at it..."

"What?"

"The thing...that I'm most embarrassed of,"

Toya whispered, bending his legs. He held the hem of his robe in both hands and pulled it open wide. Since he wasn't wearing underwear, he knew Hodaka would see everything. He had been stripped to the skin, and his twitching organ, rich with honey-like fluid, was laid bare. It was shuddering and erect, glistening with moisture.

"You shouldn't be embarrassed. You look beautiful like this," Hodaka said, his voice a spice of sensuality named humiliation.

Muddled by its taste, Toya opened his legs even wider, unashamed, exposing himself to Hodaka's gaze. The folds of flesh at his entrance twitched hungrily in the cool air, yearning for the attention of Hodaka's huge manhood.

"I'm so dirty already...just from you looking at me—"

Toya was so filthily wet, it seemed like he would climax if Hodaka just touched him. His body was that tense, waiting for stimulation.

"You do look like you could come any second."

"No—"

Toya needed to do something. He was ashamed and terrified, crushed by the strength of his lust. It would never end. He needed Hodaka's touch on his skin.

His fluid coursed down his manhood to wet his thin pubic hair, moistening him everywhere else. Toya hated himself for being so dirty; he felt only shame.

Knowledge was guilt and Toya knew. He knew the joy of the flesh experienced through intercourse. That was why he couldn't help but squirm at his own depravity. He burned for the moment that Hodaka dominated him, invaded him; he waited to be harshly exposed before the man's tyranny.

But if that desire was the other side of his love, he couldn't deny it. Yearning to be taken was all Toya needed.

Hodaka brought his lips unerringly to Toya's penis, at first only lightly sucking the narrow tip into his mouth. He tightened his lips around the neck of the organ and flicked his tongue over the hole, making Toya's hips rock with unbearable pleasure.

"Ungh!"

Toya felt like his body would dissolve from Hodaka's touch.

"Do this part yourself."

Hodaka guided Toya's hand to his chest, and Toya pulled the collar of his robe wide open so he could pinch his nipple hard.

"Nn—ungh! No, it's—ah!"

Playing with just one nipple made the other, abandoned one ache with loneliness. The one Toya played with was embarrassingly hard, but the other wasn't at all. He felt it stiffening with tension, though, and his frenzy intensified.

"Do the other one, too…" Toya said.

"What?"

Hodaka pressed lightly on the base of Toya's penis and looked up at him. Sweat gathered on Toya's forehead at the torture of being unable to climax, and he begged more desperately.

"The other…do it, too. Play with it—"

"The other? The other what?"

Toya couldn't say it. Even though he was an editor and he could speak any of the words that appeared in the books he edited with perfect calm, the word nipple seemed horribly dirty.

"What's wrong?"

"Touch my…my nipple," Toya said, the word disappearing into a gasp.

"Do it yourself," Hodaka whispered, and then took all of Toya into his mouth. It was hard for Toya to bear the feeling of warm flesh enveloping him, the ecstasy of being pulled into a hot mouth, and he shuddered as he played with his nipples.

"Ah—angh!"

Toya felt ashamed as he released everything inside Hodaka's mouth, but Hodaka drank it all easily and smiled at Toya tenderly.

"You're so flushed. You must have been playing desperately."

Both of Toya's nipples were painfully colored. He'd played with them too hard. Hodaka pressed his nails into them and sent a sharp sensation shooting up Toya's spine.

"When I'm with you, I can't stop myself," Hodaka said.

Hodaka had conquered Toya's body once again, and claimed his victory by having Toya get on his hands and knees, lifting his buttocks high into the air. Hodaka put his mouth to it without the slightest hesitation.

"Ungh!"

Toya could feel his sensitive entrance relaxing from that stimulation. His body, remembering Hodaka's embrace, twitched lewdly, trembling with the desire to be penetrated by something thick and hard.

Toya wanted it. His entire body slipped into turmoil, the intoxication reaching even his brain. Hodaka's slippery tongue drew circles around Toya's entrance, making his body burn with passion.

"Nngh—no! Not there—"

Hodaka had taught Toya about all the places in his body that gave pleasure. When the man stimulated one spot in particular, Toya's senses went white and he released even more nectar. His erection was covered in Hodaka's saliva, and his own anticipation gleamed wetly. The drops that fell from him hit the sheets, forming new stains, and the lewdness of the scene intoxicated Toya completely.

"Ah—please—nngh!" Toya moaned, his hips rocking helplessly.

"If you shake your hips like that, I can't get you loose," Hodaka scolded.

Toya felt fire flush his entire body at being told something so humiliating.

"What's the matter?" Hodaka asked.

"Put it in…please, put it in!"

Toya had no shame or worry about what anyone thought when he was in such a state. He wanted Hodaka to drive him crazy. He wanted Hodaka's domination to enthrall him, to fill him and prove that he belonged to Hodaka.

Toya twisted his head around, supporting the weight of his body on it, to look back at Hodaka's face.

The man's lips twisted into a slight smile.

"Good boy."

Hodaka pulled his fingers out and turned Toya's body over again. Toya found it painful to make love on his back, but since he wanted to see Hodaka's face, it would be worth it.

Hodaka spread Toya's legs wide and put his manhood against Toya's bud. The heavy sensation awoke the ecstasy Toya felt in submitting his will to Hodaka, and he shuddered despite himself.

Toya was spread open and Hodaka's shaft entered him, urging his walls apart. The moment Toya relaxed his muscles, Hodaka's organ thrust violently into Toya's flesh, like he'd tear it apart.

"You're so tight—"

There was sweat on Hodaka's forehead, and it trailed down his jaw and neck. It was so beautiful that Toya found himself captivated by the sight. But Hodaka wasn't going to give Toya any time to appreciate it. He pushed Toya's thighs even further apart and pounded into him with increasing ferocity. Their flesh collided with such force that the sound of it rang loudly through the room.

"Unngh!"

Tears pooled in Toya's eyes as Hodaka pushed deeper inside. But it wasn't from pain: the pleasure it brought was so much greater.

"Ah—nngh! Yes! There! Rub it—"

Sweat fell on Toya's burning flesh, but he didn't know who it belonged to. Gasps of joy poured out of him as his flesh was filled again and again. Every time

Hodaka plunged into him, a wet noise filled his ears.

"You like it there?" Hodaka asked, his voice husky and alluring. Just hearing his voice made Toya happy, and made his heart ache.

"Nngh—mm! Ah!"

Hodaka bent down and sealed Toya's mouth with his own. Toya responded by thrusting his tongue back into Hodaka's mouth rapturously. He clung to Hodaka's back, digging his nails in with the cloth of Hodaka's robe bunched up in his fists.

Toya's member rubbed between their stomachs, exuberant and dripping with fluid, but he barely noticed. He was drunk from the ecstasy of being joined to Hodaka above and below, drowning in it, and breaking apart.

Toya's breathing was rough, and Hodaka was so close he could feel his breath as well. Their breath mingled, tangling between them.

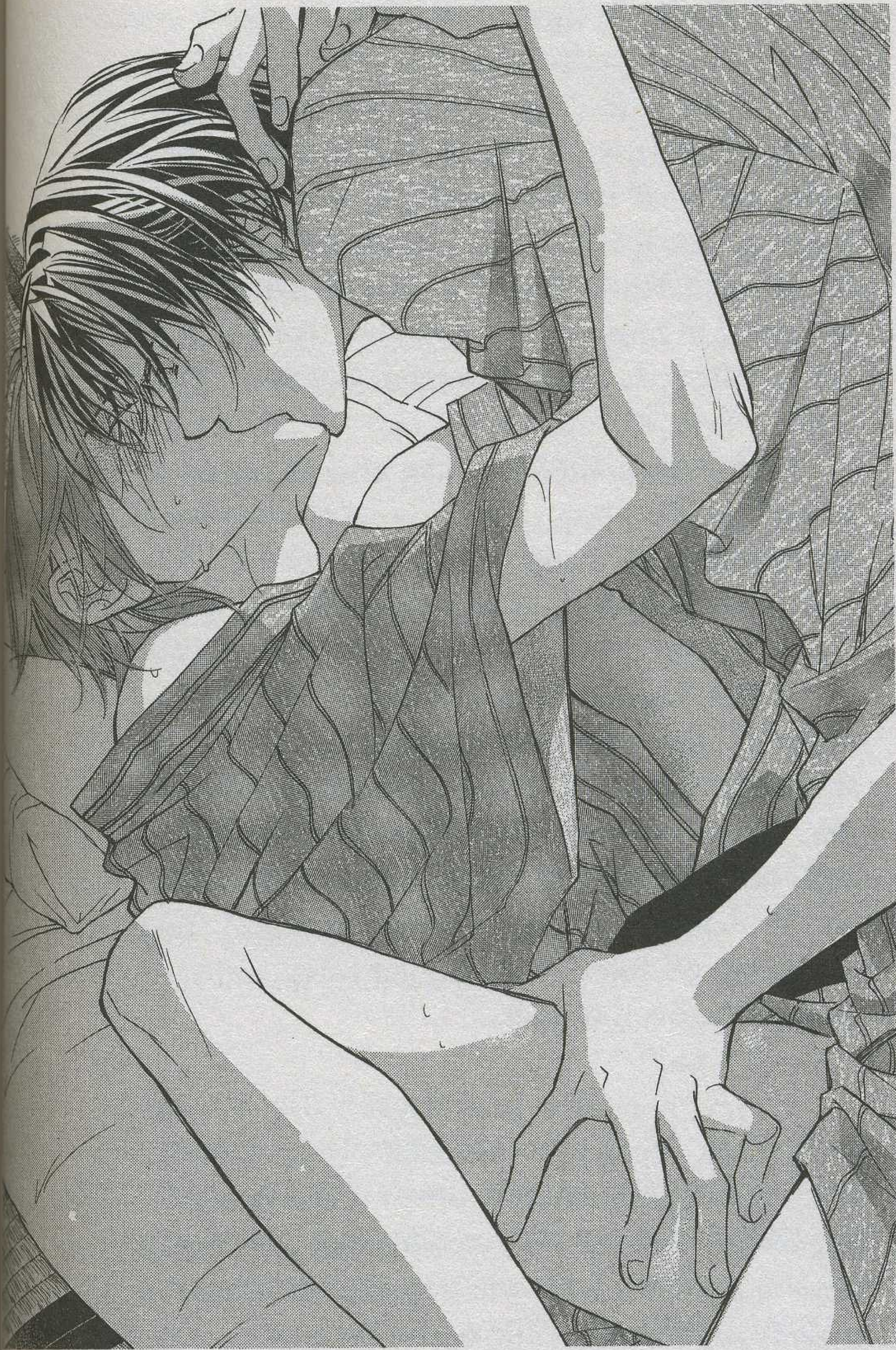
Toya's robe was bunching beneath him, but he couldn't untie the knotted belt; he didn't want to bother.

"Ungh—nngh! Yes! Yes!"

Toya chased Hodaka's lips, bumping against them, biting them, but still his moans continued. Hodaka's unyielding organ thrust inside Toya's swollen flesh, pushing him to his limits, while his skin rubbed against Toya through an opening in his robe, leaving a wet mark on Hodaka's body.

"Ah! Mm—nngh!"

Toya held Hodaka's organ tight in his body and dove into an unending river of pleasure. The fiery lust spread from the center of their connection through Toya's entire body, intoxicating him more and more.



"You're so tight today. Try to relax."

"No—I can't—angh! Ahh!"

Toya lacked the self-awareness to know if he'd clamped down even tighter. All he could do was offer up a part of his body that was never meant to take a man inside it, and let Hodaka violate him however he wanted. He wanted Hodaka to fill him with the proof that he belonged to him.

"You're so big—it's amazing! Ah—nngh!"

"Toya—"

Hodaka smiled slightly, almost smirking, and the pounding of his body became an unending sensation that coursed through Toya.

"I—I can't move! Ah—yes! There, I—ah! Ah!!"

"Nngh!"

The instant Toya ejaculated, he squeezed down hard. At the same time Hodaka gave a low moan, he shot hotly into Toya's body. The evidence of Hodaka's ferocity poured copiously into Toya, but Hodaka didn't pull out. Or maybe Toya just wouldn't let Hodaka go. Whichever it was, Hodaka grabbed Toya's hips, trembling on top of his tangled robe, and pushed their connection even further.

"Ungh!"

"You're such a good boy."

Still connected, Hodaka lifted Toya's body to bring his legs together, but their union never broke. Just one thrust—Hodaka lowered his hips and forced himself deep into Toya's body once again, and that alone nearly took Toya to another climax.

There was no time to rest from his overloading excitement when Hodaka pulled back again. Toya's brain was a melting haze. He couldn't think or hold back his cries anymore.

"Ungh! Nngh—so good—"

Without realizing it, Toya rocked his hips up and down, clinging to Hodaka's neck.

"It's so good—ah! I'm coming…again!"

"Hold yourself here and it'll pass."

Hodaka ordered Toya to hold his member and Toya tried to do it. But that chance soon blew past Toya: his body arched in a bow as he reached his pleasure.

"Nngh—ah! Ungh!"

Hodaka's ejaculation started dripping from between Toya's cheeks, where they were still connected. His body was overflowing.

"It's leaking—"

"Then I can pour even more into you," Hodaka whispered, nibbling lightly on Toya's ear. "As long as you want. As often as I can."

In place of an answer, Toya only nodded fiercely.

Toya was still sleeping.

Hodaka had cleaned himself up in the room's outdoor bath and lay down on the pillow, his head propped up on one hand. He poured some cold saké into a square cup made of glass, and took a drink. The ice had melted, so the glass was wet, but the saké was at the perfect temperature.

Hodaka looked over the face of his soundly sleeping lover. Once Toya had fallen into this exhausted sleep, Hodaka had gently wiped Toya's body off as thoroughly as he could, but Toya would need a bath in the morning.

The world was silent and Hodaka was filled with that wonderful fatigue that comes from making love all night.

Toya said he didn't do anything to make Hodaka happy, but he didn't realize how these moments of lingering silence filled Hodaka's heart. Just by being with Toya, Hodaka's heart overflowed with emotions. Day by day, life became more interesting.

Hodaka knew he had been a fool not to experience this happiness before. It was so good, he wanted to lose himself in the warmth of Toya's body and never look back to the past.

Hodaka could never let go of the man he loved most. Even if Toya's happiness depended on Hodaka letting him go, Hodaka would never be able to do it. A love that forced him to wish for such things was sinful, but Hodaka couldn't stop. He had to keep writing as a meager form of atonement.

Maybe Hodaka would begin his next novel with the main character watching over his peacefully sleeping lover. His eyelashes lowered in slumber, the angle of his nose, his partly open lips, his cheek, his forehead, his chin, and the line of his neck.

If he described it carefully, Toya would never know he was the inspiration.

Hodaka smirked at that, but no. It was better to write that private novel in his heart, and keep it locked. There was no need to tell the world how much he loved Toya; he just wished he could tell Toya his feelings whenever Toya wanted to hear them. He wished he could tell him that an enduring happiness, deeper than any other, was in the palm of his hand. Every time Hodaka felt the warmth of the incomparable man he had gained when he'd fallen into this guilty love, his heart burned with happiness.

# A Modest Wish

It was hot and muggy. Rain had been falling all morning, making the humidity spike suddenly, but the air in the café was dry and cool.

Kai Hodaka sat across from Makihara, and Makihara gazed back at Hodaka's elegant face. Makihara had the same thought every time they met: he didn't know how to deal with this person whose thoughts were so impossible to read. Sweat beaded on his forehead, and he wiped it away with a handkerchief before looking up decisively.

"Mister Hodaka?"

"What is it?"

"I mentioned to you the other day that I was thinking about having that new editor work with you. Toya Sakurai."

"Mister…Sakurai?"

"You may not remember him. I introduced you at the party."

Hodaka nodded offhandedly at Makihara's words. "Right. I got his card. But I would remember a face like that anyway."

"Really?"

Hodaka never exchanged business cards with an editor he didn't like, but he had given his card to Toya Sakurai. At the time, it had given Makihara hope for transferring off of Hodaka. It looked like he hadn't been mistaken, which was a relief.

"Of course," Hodaka said.

They had known each other for years, but Makihara could never get used to Hodaka. Hodaka could boast the greatest popularity of any mystery author of the day. Every book he put out became a bestseller. He was prominent, handsome, and tall. He had been born into a wealthy family, so he had no worries about money, either.

Hodaka was so perfect that it undermined even the most flowery description.

Except in one particular.

"How strange to hear a reaction like that from you, sir."

"People rarely ask me, so I just don't tell them."

So Toya was someone Hodaka wanted to talk about even if no one asked? Toya Sakurai was a strikingly handsome young man with a warm personality, but had some other aspect of him caught Hodaka's eye?

"I'm sorry that our editors are so unreliable with you."

They were a large publishing house with many employees and editorial departments, so staff rotations were an everyday reality.

The authors were no doubt familiar with changes in their editors, too, but in Hodaka's case, there just weren't many people who could deal with him. Finding an editor for Hodaka was a headache for every publisher, and Makihara was sure Hodaka knew that better than anyone. Toya would be Hodaka's fourth editor with Sozan Publishing.

"No, I know I bear some of the responsibility," Hodaka answered in a cool voice, just as Makihara had expected.

Since there was no commercial author as successful as Hodaka, it would be a major blunder to assign any of the responsibility to him. The fact that Hodaka's editors never stayed long was most likely due to his eccentricity.

Hodaka always met his deadlines and controlled the quality of his writing well. He knew that if he published constantly, the readers would get bored, so he limited himself to a reasonable number of books each year. He kept his deadlines, his books sold, his writing was top quality—everything about it was perfect. But he was inflexible and had no compassion. If anyone tried to ask him to work on an unexpected project, he would refuse, saying he didn't have the time.

He drew a sharp line between his professional and personal lives. Makihara thought it was wonderful that Hodaka could avoid being too sentimental, but there were a lot of people who felt they couldn't deal with someone as robotic as Hodaka. It was usually the editors who gave up.

It was human to make mistakes no matter how careful one was, but Hodaka didn't do that. Interacting with someone who was like a robot, who never made mistakes, would wear anyone out. And since power relationships would naturally develop, it was difficult and stifling work.

Hodaka did have some defects, though. He was too perfect, and he lacked emotion. That was why Makihara couldn't envy Hodaka. However mediocre and boring Makihara's life may have been, he was at least able to enjoy simple pleasures.

Remarkable people suffer in remarkable ways, Makihara thought, but he could never bear that sort of thing. He was sure no one but Hodaka could overcome it. But he wouldn't mind it if working with Toya changed Hodaka a little.

Makihara'd had his eye on Toya for a while. Toya had only transferred into the department in June, but his performance record had been improving even in his former position. He was enthusiastic, befitting of his declaration that his true wish was to work in the pulp lines, and he didn't lack for consideration or concern for others.

Makihara had heard that Toya had gone to the same university as Hodaka, so he hoped their relationship would go smoothly. They might at least have something to talk about. But Makihara had never dared hope that Hodaka would actually have any actual interest in Toya.

"You two should meet, then. What about next Thursday? I'll be finishing up a project that day," Makihara said.

"All right. Have him come to my apartment. He'll be coming there often anyway."

"Thank you for offering."

While he bowed his head, Makihara looked at Hodaka's expression. No emotion whatsoever showed on that beautiful face, and Makihara gave a bitter smile at how sad Hodaka seemed.

For Hodaka, an editor was nothing special: just another cog to put out books. But they were all flesh-and-blood human beings, not machines. Makihara wondered if Hodaka would ever realize that simple fact.

"Well then, if you'll excuse me."

They parted ways outside the café, and Makihara watched Hodaka as he walked away. What would make Hodaka have interest in the companionship of a flesh-and-blood human being? Would his writing change if he fell in love?

Makihara knew that if Hodaka ever discovered the simple fact that blood ran through the veins of all human beings, his novels would immediately offer even more depth and enjoyment.

Makihara secretly felt both regretful and useless that he could do nothing to bring that out.

"Mister Makihara? Are you all right? You were zoned out."

Makihara looked up in surprise as Toya spoke to him. They were at a party celebrating the trilogy that had begun with *Emergence,* and Hodaka was extremely busy greeting all the VIPs.

"Oh. I was just thinking about when I made you Hodaka's editor."

"What? That was almost three years ago," Toya said, confused.

"It doesn't matter how much time passes, pleasant memories stay with us."

"You were so worried about it at the time. I still didn't have a clue what I was doing back then."

"Of course I was worried! But you exceeded all my expectations."

Makihara didn't withhold his praise.

"I literally learned through experience. Those are nice memories," Toya said, and he flushed slightly, as if embarrassed at the meaning of his own words.

Seeing that, Makihara guessed at Toya's thoughts and smirked. Makihara was the only person at the company who knew that Toya and Hodaka were involved.

It had been so unexpected when Toya fell for Hodaka, especially since he had a fiancée at the time. But it somehow made sense that Hodaka went for both men and women. Or, Makihara realized, since Hodaka had no interest in people, he didn't care about a person's gender.

Ever since the beginning of their relationship, something tender suffused every corner of Toya's face, and a faint perfume hung in the air around him. Makihara didn't notice such things, but Yoshikawa had once jokingly confessed to Makihara over drinks.

"Sometimes there's something weirdly erotic about Toya, and I can't stop thinking about it."

But Makihara couldn't support everything Toya and Hodaka did. Toya was kind, but also indecisive, so the division between business and personal could easily blur for him. Makihara feared that if anything would be a problem, it would be that.

"What are you two doing tucked away in this corner?" Hodaka asked as he approached with a smile.

"You're the star, Mister Hodaka, not us."

Toya's voice was formal, never crossing the line of professionalism. No one would ever imagine that they had a relationship in private. Makihara casually wondered if maybe he could trust Toya's judgment after all.

"You played an important role, too, Mister Sakurai. There's someone I'd like you to meet."

"Who, me?"

Hodaka smiled as Toya spoke, and his face became gentler. His expression was thoroughly surprising. Makihara had always thought Hodaka had a very handsome face, but he'd never known the man could look so gentle, and so at peace.

"Do you mind if I borrow Mister Sakurai for a moment, Mister Makihara?"

"Go right ahead," Makihara said cheerfully, and watched the two men walk away.

Suddenly, Hodaka turned around. Reading the look in his eyes, Makihara gulped, but the next moment he felt like laughing. He couldn't believe it. Who could have ever imagined the day would come when he would see a threatening and possessive look from Hodaka?

Makihara wasn't going to steal Toya from him, even without looks like that. Toya was just one of his employees. Makihara felt nothing for him.

Maybe the one who blurred the line between business and pleasure was actually the cool, mechanical Hodaka. Maybe Hodaka was the one exercising self-control so he didn't get too obsessed with Toya.

*Passion.*

That was definitely what Hodaka had lacked. Because he had everything he could ever want, Hodaka had lost his passion. He had probably never experienced it. But perhaps Toya had given him that.

"I'm sorry I'm late."

Makihara saw Yo Amano come in with a cheerful voice and greet the two other men. After a while, they ended their conversation, and Makihara approached Amano.

"Mister Amano! How's your research going?"

"Oh, hello, Mister Makihara," Amano answered with a carefree smile. He was handsome, but there wasn't even a hint of demureness in him. He was the type who never shied away from anything. And he didn't put on a polite act for Makihara, whom he'd met only a few times.

"There was a lot of turbulence, so my flight home was delayed. And then I had to go home and change, but I finally made it."

"I'm sorry you had so much trouble. But you look like you get some sun while you were there."

"Just a little."

Amano had just landed at Narita Airport that afternoon, so he'd called to tell them he might not be able to make it. But he'd managed to get there anyway.

"They still seem so happy," Amano murmured, sounding almost jealous.

Makihara looked at him suspiciously.

"Mister Hodaka is on top of his game in public and private. I have to try and follow that example."

"Aren't you satisfied, Mister Amano?"

"I still have a long way to go. My novels are still the most important thing to me."

"I'm glad to hear that. You have to keep giving us such good new novels."

"I'll certainly try."

Makihara's gaze turned back to the night's guest of honor once more. He saw Hodaka introducing Toya to someone who seemed to be a friend of his. Watching their peaceful conversation, Makihara imagined what Hodaka's next novel would be like.

He hadn't been able to work closely with Hodaka, so he hadn't been able to change him. But he thought he'd been able to pass along a few hints to success from their time together. Makihara decided that he deserved a pat on the back for making Toya Hodaka's editor that day, and he smiled.

# *Postscript*

Hello, this is Katsura Izumi.

Thank you for picking up the new edition of the short story collection for the *Guilty* series. Since this volume took longer to be released than the rest of the series, there was a slight delay in getting it into this new format. But now that all four volumes have been reissued, I'm ecstatic.

*Forsaken* is made up of several short stories.

This book first came out after some consultation with my editor back, when the books were still in Novels format. But I think it might have been a little hard to pin down before, so this time we changed the order of the stories to go chronologically.

First is an epilogue I wrote for a magazine when *The Guilty: Verdict* came out: "The Guilty ~Precious Love~." This story happens between *Verdict* and *Original Sin*.

"Felony" and its extra scene are stories I wrote as a web novel for Dahlia's website. They happen between *Original Sin* and *Redemption*. This helps you understand Hodaka's transformation up through *Forsaken*, I think.

For the short story in the new edition, I challenged myself to write something from Makihara's perspective.

I think he sees our couple a little differently than Amano does.

Also, the title "*Forsaken*" is a little bit of a stretch, but I had a lot of trouble deciding on it (laugh). I couldn't come up with a really good title related to the idea of guilt, so I still ask myself why it has this title.

Not only was the *Guilty* series reissued as a mass market paperback, it was also the first time one of my stories had been dramatized and sold on CD. The CD of *The Guilty: Verdict* is on sale now, so I'd love it if you picked up a copy.

Finally, my thanks to everyone who helped me.

Hinako Takanaga, who graced all four books of the series with her amazing drawings. The characters she draws are really nice to look at, so I'm happy every time I see them. Thank you so much!

I also offer my deepest gratitude to my editor Ms. Hayakawa, who stuck with me to the very end despite all the trouble I gave her, and to my whole editorial team.

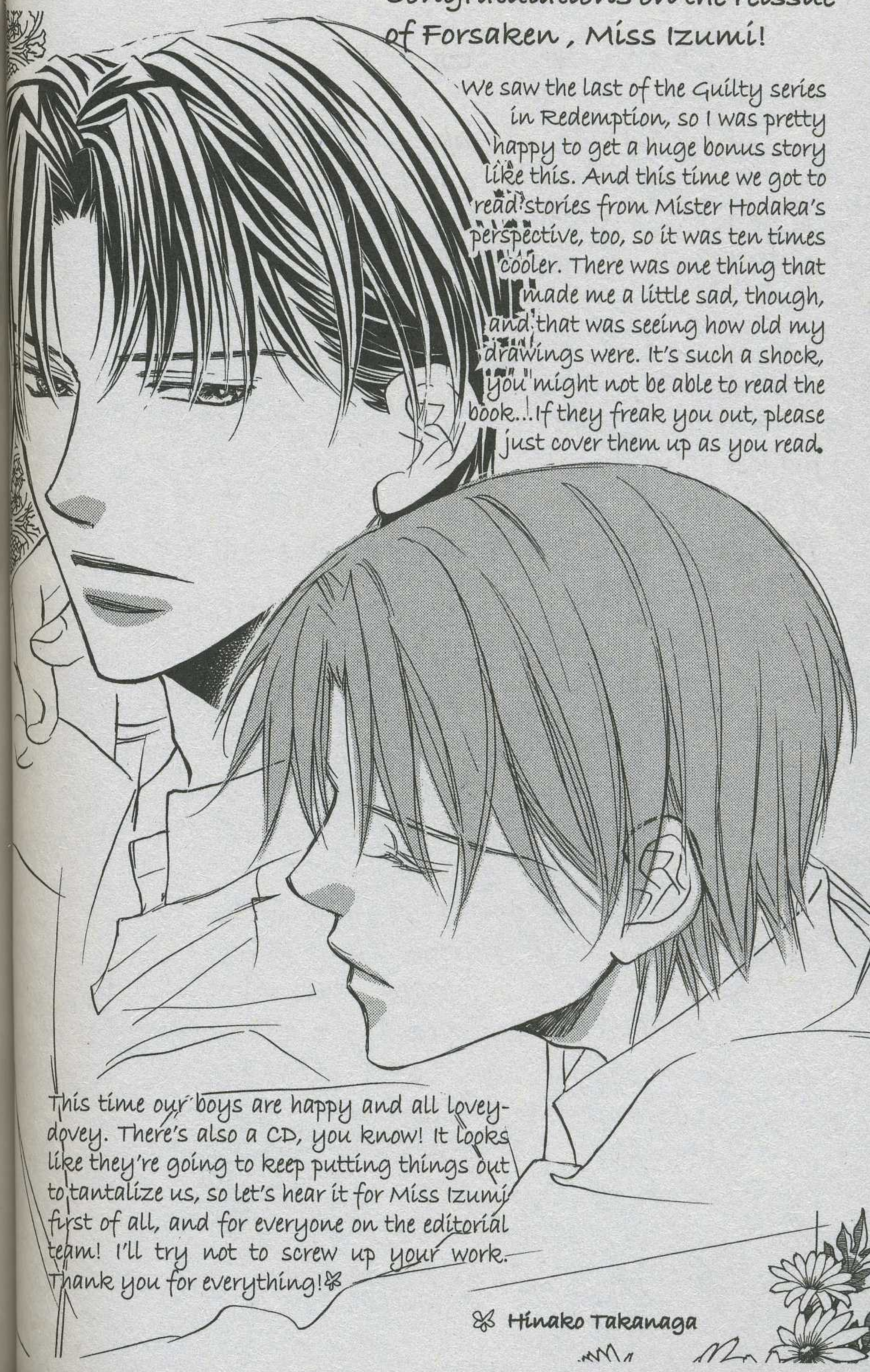
And finally, to all the readers who have supported this series, thank you from the bottom of my heart.

Thank you all so much.

I hope to see you again soon.

Katsura Izumi

* Website: http://www.k-izumi.jp/



Congratulations on the reissue of Forsaken, Miss Izumi!

We saw the last of the Guilty series in Redemption, so I was pretty happy to get a huge bonus story like this. And this time we got to read stories from Mister Hodaka's perspective, too, so it was ten times cooler. There was one thing that made me a little sad, though, and that was seeing how old my drawings were. It's such a shock, you might not be able to read the book...If they freak you out, please just cover them up as you read.

This time our boys are happy and all lovey-dovey. There's also a CD, you know! It looks like they're going to keep putting things out to tantalize us, so let's hear it for Miss Izumi first of all, and for everyone on the editorial team! I'll try not to screw up your work. Thank you for everything!✿

✿ Hinako Takanaga